



Blood Libel

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Blood Libel Explainer

What is the **Blood Libel**?

The Blood Libel is a centuries-old antisemitic myth which falsely claims that Jews murder non-Jewish children, particularly Christian children, in order to use their blood in religious or other rituals. The Blood Libel usually accuses Jews of using Christian blood as an ingredient in unleavened bread for the Passover festival. Blood Libels have frequently led to pogroms and mob violence against local Jewish communities, and remain a prevalent form of antisemitism today.

Where did the Blood Libel come from?

One of the first recorded allegations of Blood Libel occurred in Ancient Greece, according to the historian Josephus, who wrote that Apion the Alexandrian proclaimed that the Jews kidnapped a Greek each year and offered them as a sacrifice before eating their organs.¹ During the Middle Ages, the Blood Libel spread across Europe, and in 1144 the first European case of the Libel occurred in Norwich, England. There, the Jewish community were falsely blamed and punished for the torture and murder of a young Christian boy named William. Despite the fact that the only so-called evidence



for the Jews' murder of William came from a dream William's mother had had before his disappearance, and the fact that the Sheriff of Norwich announced that the Jews were innocent, the accusation that Jews killed Christian children and drank their blood gained recognition.²

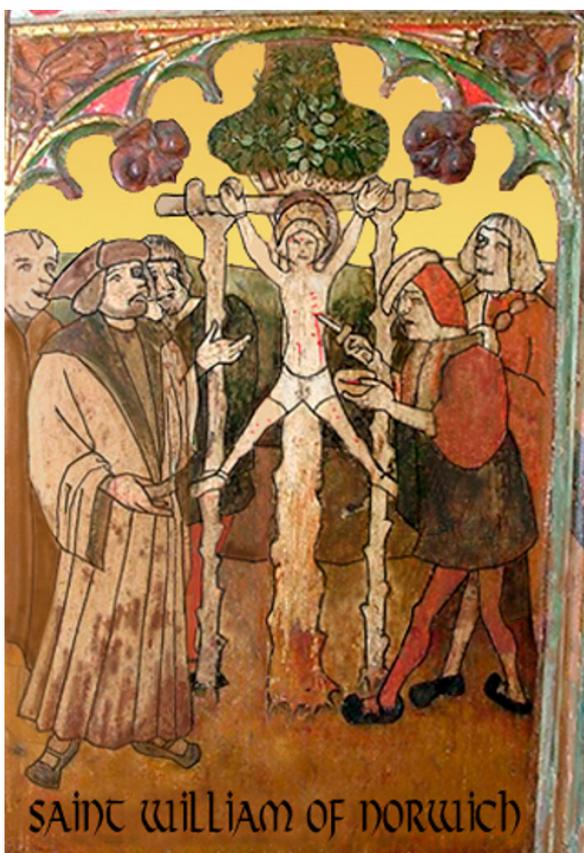
How did the Blood Libel function throughout history?

1. Albert Ehrman, *The Origins of the Ritual Murder Accusation and Blood Libel*, *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (SPRING 1976), pp. 83-90

2. <https://commons.und.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3025&context=theses>

In the centuries following the Libel in Norwich, over 100 Blood Libels were documented in Britain and in Europe, many of which resulted in the massacres of Jews.³ One of the most infamous libels took place in Lincoln, England, in 1255 and was known as the case of 'Little Saint Hugh', who the Jews allegedly fattened for ten days before inviting all the Jews of England to his crucifixion.⁴ Hugh was later venerated as Saint, and a shrine to him has been in place at the Lincoln Cathedral since the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. However, in 1955, the Church of England admitted that the legend of Little Saint Hugh and the Blood Libel were false, and a plaque at the Lincoln Cathedral now recognises that the

“trumped up stories of ‘ritual murder’ ... cost many innocent Jews their lives”⁵



Blood Libels also played a role in the Spanish Inquisition which began in 1492, where Conversos (Jews who had converted to Christianity) were tortured into confessing that the Chief Rabbi had murdered and crucified a Christian child around the time of Passover.⁶

Although Pope Gregory X (1271-1276) condemned Christians who falsified reports of Jewish ritual murder, occurrences of Blood Libels continued into modern times, such as in Lublin, now Poland, in 1636 and in Damascus, Syria, in 1840. The Blood Libel also made its way into popular literary culture in Britain, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* - in the *Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer tells the story of a child murdered by Jews.⁷

How does the **Blood Libel** manifest today?

Although the Blood Libel is less prevalent today than in past centuries, it is still perpetuated around the world. For example, in March 2020, an Italian artist named Giovanni Gasparo painted

3. [adl.org/education/resources/glossary-terms/blood-libel](https://www.adl.org/education/resources/glossary-terms/blood-libel)

4. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/blood-libel>

5. Coakley, Sarah; Pailin, David Arthur (1993). *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*. Clarendon Press.

6. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/blood-libel>

7. *The Portable Chaucer: Revised Edition*, Penguin, Translated and Edited by Theodore Morrison, 1977

Martirio di San Simonino da Trento per omicidio rituale ebraico' (The Martyrdom of St. Simon of Trento in accordance with Jewish ritual murder), which depicted the Blood Libel.⁸

However, the Blood Libel is more often evoked today in the Middle East in relation to Zionism and the State of Israel. In 2012 Khaled Al-Zafrani of the Egyptian Justice and Progress Party stated on television that Jews 'take a Christian child, slit his throat and slaughter him. Then they take his blood and make their [matzah].'⁹ Similarly, in November 2015, a Hamas official appeared on news networks in Gaza claiming that Jews 'kill children and collect their blood, in order to knead it into the bread that is eaten on Passover.'¹⁰ The Blood Libel was also featured during a pro-Hamas rally in Seattle, USA, in 2014, during which marchers carried posters showing Jews eating Christian children and drinking cups of their blood.¹¹

Nevertheless, Jewish communal bodies have repeatedly stressed that it is possible to criticise Israel without being antisemitic: if criticism of Israel or Israeli policy avoids antisemitic tropes, it is unlikely to be antisemitic. As stated in the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, where criticism of Israel is similar to criticism levelled against other countries or their governments, it is unlikely to be antisemitic.



8. <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitism/Italian-artist-accused-of-antisemitism-for-new-painting-of-blood-libel-622578>

9. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-politician-revives-passover-blood-libel/>

10. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/blood-libel>

11. <https://forward.com/culture/320281/why-the-blood-libel-wont-die/>

So... **is there any truth** to the Blood Libel?

Absolutely, emphatically not - murder is a complete violation of Jewish law, explicitly prohibited and goes against Jewish tradition and ritual. As stated in the Book of Leviticus, one of the five books of the Old Testament, Jews are completely prohibited from consuming animal blood in any form. Meat is salted so as to ensure an absolute absence of any blood in Jewish food, and even the slaughter of animals is very strictly regulated in Jewish dietary law. The idea that Jews are hungry for human blood is especially absurd, and feeds the notion that Jews are in some way not human but bloodthirsty, vampiric beings. Despite this, the harmful myth of the Blood Libel continues to thrive.

Glossary

Matzah:

An unleavened bread made from flour and water that Jews eat as part of the Passover celebration.

Passover:

Passover (also referred to as Pesach) is one of the most important Jewish festivals. The week-long festival commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Ancient Egypt and is celebrated through a number of rituals. These include the retelling the Passover story during the traditional Passover meal called a Seder, removing leavened foods from the home, and eating special foods such as Matzah (see above) and bitter herbs to recall the Jews' suffering as slaves in Ancient Egypt.

Zionism:

Zionism is the belief in the Jewish right for self-determination in the territory roughly defined as the historic Land of Israel. Modern Zionism, as a national political movement, emerged in the late 19th century in Central and Eastern Europe, in response to increasing levels of antisemitism and also in line with the political mood of the era - which is commonly referred to as the 'Age of Nationalisms'. Theodore Herzl is often cited as the father of modern political Zionism.

Pogrom:

An anti-Jewish riot, with the aim of massacring or expelling Jewish people. The term, originally from Slavic languages, has been used in English to describe attacks on Jews, in the Russian Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries, and in various other contexts since.

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