In the year 1095 the Catholic Church, aroused by the Moslem encroachments in Palestine, proclaimed a crusade against the Saracens to recover Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher. The following year, in the spring of 1096, bands of zealous crusaders led by monks and soldiers set out for the Holy Land. Many of the crusaders were pious; but there can be no question that many also were run-away serfs, ambitious business men, adventurers, and criminals. As they passed through Germany on their way to Jerusalem this motley crew killed thousands of “infidel” Jews in the larger cities such as Speyer, Worms, Mayence, and Cologne.

In May, 1096 a band of crusaders led by Emico, a German noble, forced its way into the city of Mayence and finally into the archepiscopal palace where the Jews had taken refuge. The slaughter and suicide of the Jews in this palace with all the attendant horror and hysteria are graphically described in the following two selections taken from a Hebrew historical account by Solomon bar Samson—of whom we know very little—who wrote about 1140.

I.

(It was on the third of Siwan. . . . at noon [Tuesday, May 27], that Emico the wicked, the enemy of the Jews, came with his whole army against the city gate, and the citizens opened it up for him. [Emico, a German noble, led a band of plundering German and French crusaders.] Then the enemies of the Lord said to each other: “Look! They have opened up the gate for us. Now let us avenge the blood of ‘the hanged one’ [Jesus].”

The children of the holy covenant who were there, martyrs who feared the Most High, although they saw the great multitude, an army numerous as the sand on the shore of the sea, still clung to their Creator. Then young and old donned their armor and girded on their weapons, and at their head was Rabbi Kalonymus ben Meshul-lam, the chief of the community. Yet because of the many troubles and the fasts which they had observed they had no strength to stand up against the enemy. [They had fasted to avert the impending
evils.] Then came gangs and bands, sweeping through like a flood, until Mayence was filled from end to end.

The foe Emico proclaimed in the hearing of the community that the enemy be driven from the city and be put to flight. Panic was great in the town. Each Jew in the inner court of the bishop girded on his weapons, and all moved towards the palace gate to fight the crusaders and the citizens. They fought each other up to the very gate, but the sins of the Jews brought it about that the enemy overcame them and took the gate.

The hand of the Lord was heavy against His people. All the Gentiles were gathered together against the Jews in the courtyard to blot out their name, and the strength of our people weakened when they saw the wicked Edomites overpowering them. [The Edomites were the traditional foes of the Jews; here, Christians are meant.] The bishop's men, who had promised to help them, were the very first to flee, thus delivering the Jews into the hands of the enemy. They were indeed a poor support; even the bishop himself fled from his church for it was thought to kill him also because he had spoken good things of the Jews. . . . [Archbishop Ruthard had been paid to remain and defend the Jews. He was later accused of having received some of the plunder taken from them.]

When the children of the holy covenant saw that the heavenly decree of death had been issued and that the enemy had conquered them and had entered the courtyard, then all of them—old men and young, virgins and children, servants and maids—cried out together to their Father in heaven and, weeping for themselves and for their lives, accepted as just the sentence of God. One to another they said: “Let us be strong and let us bear the yoke of the holy religion, for only in this world can the enemy kill us—and the easiest of the four deaths is by the sword. But we, our souls in paradise, shall continue to live eternally, in the great shining reflection of the divine glory.” [In Jewish law the four death penalties were: stoning, burning, beheading, strangulation.]

With a whole heart and with a willing soul they then spoke: “After all it is not right to criticize the acts of God—blessed be He and blessed be His name—who has given to us His Torah and a command to put ourselves to death, to kill ourselves for the unity of His holy name. Happy are we if we do His will. Happy is anyone who is killed or slaughtered, who dies for the unity of His name, so that he is ready to enter the World to Come, to dwell in the heavenly camp with the righteous—with Rabbi Akiba and his companions, the pillars of the universe, who were killed for His name’s
The Romans martyred Akiba during the Bar Kokba revolt, about 135 C.E. Not only this; but he exchanges the world of darkness for the world of light, the world of trouble for the world of joy, and the world that passes away for the world that lasts for all eternity." Then all of them, to a man, cried out with a loud voice: "Now we must delay no longer for the enemy are already upon us. Let us hasten and offer ourselves as a sacrifice to the Lord. Let him who has a knife examine it that it not be nicked, and let him come and slaughter us for the sanctification of the Only One, the Everlasting, and then let him cut his own throat or plunge the knife into his own body." [A nick in the slaughterer's knife would make it ritually unfit.]

As soon as the enemy came into the courtyard they found some of the very pious there with our brilliant master, Isaac ben Moses. He stretched out his neck, and his head they cut off first. The others, wrapped in their fringed praying-shawls, sat by themselves in the courtyard, eager to do the will of their Creator. They did not care to flee into the chamber to save themselves for this temporal life, but out of love they received upon themselves the sentence of God. The enemy showered stones and arrows upon them, but they did not care to flee; and [Esther 9:5] "with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter, and destruction" the foe killed all of those whom they found there. When those in the chambers saw the deed of these righteous ones, how the enemy had already come upon them, they then cried out, all of them: "There is nothing better than for us to offer our lives as a sacrifice." [The outnumbered Jews had no chance to win: Emico is reported to have had about 12,000 men.]

The women there girded their loins with strength and slew their sons and their daughters and then themselves. Many men, too, plucked up courage and killed their wives, their sons, their infants. The tender and delicate mother slaughtered the babe she had played with; all of them, men and women arose and slaughtered one another. The maidens and the young brides and grooms looked out of the windows and in a loud voice cried: "Look and see, O our God, what we do for the sanctification of Thy great name in order not to exchange you for a hanged and crucified one. . . ."

Thus were the precious children of Zion, the Jews of Mayence, tried with ten trials like Abraham, our father, and like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah [who were thrown into a fiery furnace, Daniel 3:21]. They tied their sons as Abraham tied Isaac his son, and they received upon themselves with a willing soul the yoke of the fear of God, the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be
He, rather than deny and exchange the religion of our King for [Isaiah 14:19] "an abhorred offshoot [Jesus] . . . ." [Christians and Jews of those days often spoke contemptuously of each other's religion.] They stretched out their necks to the slaughter and they delivered their pure souls to their Father in heaven. Righteous and pious women bared their throats to each other, offering to be sacrificed for the unity of the Name. A father turning to his son or brother, a brother to his sister, a woman to her son or daughter, a neighbor to a neighbor or a friend, a groom to a bride, a fiancé to a fiancée, would kill and would be killed, and blood touched blood. The blood of the men mingled with their wives', the blood of the fathers with their children's, the blood of the brothers with their sisters', the blood of the teachers with their disciples', the blood of the grooms with their brides', the blood of the leaders with their cantors', the blood of the judges with their scribes', and the blood of infants and sucklings with their mothers'. For the unity of the honored and awe-inspiring Name were they killed and slaughtered.

The ears of him who hears these things will tingle, for who has ever heard anything like this? Inquire now and look about, was there ever such an abundant sacrifice as this since the days of the primeval Adam? Were there ever eleven hundred offerings on one day, each one of them like the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?

For the sake of Isaac who was ready to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah, the world shook, as it is said [Isaiah 33:7]: "Behold their valiant ones cry without; [the angels of peace weep bitterly]" and [Jeremiah 4:28] "the heavens grow dark." Yet see what these martyrs did! Why did the heavens not grow dark and the stars not withdraw their brightness? Why did not the moon and the sun grow dark in their heavens when on one day, on the third of Siwan, on a Tuesday, eleven hundred souls were killed and slaughtered, among them so many infants and sucklings who had not transgressed nor sinned, so many poor, innocent souls?

Wilt Thou, despite this, still restrain Thyself, O Lord? For Thy sake it was that these numberless souls were killed. Avenge quickly the blood of Thy servants which was spilt in our days and in our sight. Amen.

11. Rachel and Her Children

(Now I shall recount and tell of the most unusual deeds that were done on that day [May 27, 1096] by these righteous ones. . . . Who has ever seen anything like this? Who has ever heard of a deed like
that which was performed by this righteous and pious woman, the young Rachel, the daughter of Rabbi Isaac ben Asher, the wife of Rabbi Judah? For she said to her friends: "I have four children. Do not spare even them, lest the Christians come, take them alive, and bring them up in their false religion. Through them, too, sanctify the name of the Holy God."

So one of her companions came and picked up a knife to slaughter her son. But when the mother of the children saw the knife, she let out a loud and bitter lament and she beat her face and breast, crying: "Where are Thy mercies, O God?" In the bitterness of her soul she said to her friend: "Do not slay Isaac in the presence of his brother Aaron lest Aaron see his brother's death and run away."
The woman then took the lad Isaac, who was small and very pretty, and she slaughtered him while the mother spread out her sleeves to receive the blood, catching it in her garment instead of a basin. When the child Aaron saw that his brother Isaac was slain, he screamed again and again: "Mother, mother, do not butcher me," and ran and hid under a chest.

She had two daughters also who still lived at home, Bella and Matrona, beautiful young girls, the children of her husband Rabbi Judah. The girls took the knife and sharpened it themselves that it should not be nicked. Then the woman bared their necks and sacrificed them to the Lord God of Hosts who has commanded us not to change His pure religion but to be perfect with Him, as it is written [Deuteronomy 18:13]: "Perfect shall you be with the Lord your God."

When this righteous woman had made an end of sacrificing her three children to their Creator, she then raised her voice and called out to her son Aaron: "Aaron, where are you? You also I will not spare nor will I have any mercy." Then she dragged him out by his foot from under the chest where he had hidden himself, and she sacrificed him before God, the high and exalted. She put her children next to her body, two on each side, covering them with her two sleeves, and there they lay struggling in the agony of death. When the enemy seized the room they found her sitting and wailing over them. "Show us the money that is under your sleeves," they said to her. But when it was the slaughtered children they saw, they struck her and killed her, upon her children, and her spirit flew away and her soul found peace at last. To her applied the Biblical verse [Hosea 10:14]: "The mother was dashed in pieces with her children." . . .

When the father saw the death of his four beautiful, lovely
children, he cried aloud, weeping and wailing, and threw himself upon the sword in his hand so that his bowels came out, and he wallowed in blood on the road together with the dying who were convulsed, rolling in their life’s blood. The enemy killed all those who were left in the room and then stripped them naked; [Lamentations 1:11] “See, O Lord, and behold, how abject I am become.” Then the crusaders began to give thanks in the name of “the hanged one” because they had done what they wanted with all those in the room of the bishop so that not a soul escaped. [The crusaders now held a thanksgiving service in the archbishop’s palace where the massacre took place.]

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The Accusation of the Ritual Murder of St. William of Norwich

MEDIEVAL Christians (and some modern ones, too) believed that Christian children were seized and tortured to death by the Jews during the Passover season. This myth appears in a complete form for the first time in The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich, a Latin work written about 1173 by Thomas of Monmouth, a contemporary of the events which he relates. The story of the ritual murder of the boy William in 1144 is virtually the first of a long series of such accusations, a series that has not yet come to an end. The significance of these accusations is that by such descriptions of the Jew they have served throughout the ages to create an anti-Jewish mentality. Generations have believed that no Christian child was safe in Jewish hands. Hundreds of Jews have been imprisoned, killed, or burnt alive on this charge. The Papacy has frequently denounced this charge, yet it is equally true that in numerous instances the accusation of ritual murder was not made except with the vigorous support of the local Church authorities.

The author, Thomas of Monmouth, a monk in the Norwich Benedictine monastery, was an exceedingly credulous person. Dr. Jessopp of Norwich, one of the editors of Thomas' work, believes that our monkish author belongs to the class of those who are "deceivers and being deceived."

In the specific case of William of Norwich, the evidence, critically sifted, leads one to believe that he actually existed and that his body was found after he had died a violent death. Everything beyond this, however, is in the realm of speculation.

HOW WILLIAM WAS WONT TO RESORT TO THE JEWS, AND HAVING BEEN CHID BY HIS OWN PEOPLE FOR SO DOING, HOW HE WITHDREW HIMSELF FROM THEM

("When therefore he was flourishing in this blessed boyhood of his, and had attained to his eighth year [about 1140], he was entrusted to the skinners [furriers] to be taught their craft. Gifted
with a teachable disposition and bringing industry to bear upon it, in a short time he far surpassed lads of his own age in the craft aforesaid, and he equalled some who had been his teachers. So leaving the country, drawn by a divine urge he betook himself to the city and lodged with a very famous master of that craft, and some time passed away. He was seldom in the country, but was occupied in the city and sedulously gave himself to the practice of his craft, and thus reached his twelfth year [\[1144\]].

Now, while he was staying in Norwich, the Jews who were settled there and required their cloaks or their robes or other garments (whether pledged to them, or their own property) to be repaired, preferred him before all other skinners. For they esteemed him to be especially fit for their work, either because they had learnt that he was guileless and skilful, or, because attracted to him by their avarice, they thought they could bargain with him for a lower price. Or, as I rather believe, because by the ordering of divine providence he had been predestined to martyrdom from the beginning of time, and gradually step by step was drawn on, and chosen to be made a mock of and to be put to death by the Jews, in scorn of the Lord's Passion, as one of little foresight, and so the more fit for them. [William is to be put to death to mock the crucifixion.]

For I have learnt from certain Jews, who were afterwards converted to the Christian faith, how that at that time they had planned to do this very thing with some Christian, and in order to carry out their malignant purpose, at the beginning of Lent they had made choice of the boy William, being twelve years of age and a boy of unusual innocence.

So it came to pass that when the holy boy, ignorant of the treachery that had been planned, had frequent dealings with the Jews, he was taken to task by Godwin the priest, who had the boy's aunt as his wife, and by a certain Wulward with whom he lodged, and he was prohibited from going in and out among them any more. But the Jews, annoyed at the thwarting of their designs, tried with all their might to patch up a new scheme of wickedness, and all the more vehemently as the day for carrying out the crime they had determined upon drew near, and the victim, which they had thought they had already secured, had slipped out of their wicked hands.

Accordingly, collecting all the cunning of their crafty plots, they found—I am not sure whether he was a Christian or a Jew—a man who was a most treacherous fellow and just the fitting person for carrying out their execrable crime, and with all haste—for their Passover was coming on in three days—they sent him to find out
and bring back with him the victim which, as I said before, had slipped out of their hands.

**HOW HE WAS SEDUCED BY THE JEWS’ MESSENGER**

At the dawn of day, on the Monday [March 20, 1144] after Palm Sunday, that detestable messenger of the Jews set out to execute the business that was committed to him, and at last the boy William, after being searched for with very great care, was found. When he was found, he got round him with cunning wordy tricks, and so deceived him with his lying promises. . . .

**HOW ON HIS GOING TO THE JEWS HE WAS TAKEN, MOCKED, AND SLAIN. . . .**

Then the boy, like an innocent lamb, was led to the slaughter. He was treated kindly by the Jews at first, and, ignorant of what was being prepared for him, he was kept till the morrow. But on the next day [Tuesday, March 21], which in that year was the Passover for them, after the singing of the hymns appointed for the day in the synagogue, the chiefs of the Jews. . . . suddenly seized hold of the boy William as he was having his dinner and in no fear of any treachery, and illtreated him in various horrible ways. For while some of them held him behind, others opened his mouth and introduced an instrument of torture which is called a teazle [a wooden gag], and, fixing it by straps through both jaws to the back of his neck, they fastened it with a knot as tightly as it could be drawn.

After that, taking a short piece of rope of about the thickness of one’s little finger and tying three knots in it at certain distances marked out, they bound round that innocent head with it from the forehead to the back, forcing the middle knot into his forehead and the two others into his temples, the two ends of the rope being most tightly stretched at the back of his head and fastened in a very tight knot. The ends of the rope were then passed round his neck and carried round his throat under his chin, and there they finished off this dreadful engine of torture in a fifth knot.

But not even yet could the cruelty of the torturers be satisfied without adding even more severe pains. Having shaved his head, they stabbed it with countless thorn-points, and made the blood come horribly from the wounds they made. [Jesus had worn a crown of thorns before his death.] And so cruel were they and so eager to inflict pain that it was difficult to say whether they were more cruel or more ingenious in their tortures. For their skill in torturing kept up the strength of their cruelty and ministered arms thereto.

And thus, while these enemies of the Christian name were rioting
in the spirit of malignity around the boy, some of those present ad-
judged him to be fixed to a cross in mockery of the Lord's Passion,
as though they would say: "Even as we condemned the Christ to
a shameful death, so let us also condemn the Christian, so that, uniting
the Lord and his servant in a like punishment, we may retort upon
themselves the pain of that reproach which they impute to us."

Conspiring, therefore, to accomplish the crime of this great and
detestable malice, they next laid their blood-stained hands upon the
innocent victim, and having lifted him from the ground and fastened
him upon the cross, they vied with one another in their efforts to
make an end of him.

And we, after enquiring into the matter very diligently, did both
find the house, and discovered some most certain marks in it of what
had been done there. [This was supposed to be the house of a rich
Jew, Eleazar, who was later murdered by order of his debtor, Sir
Simon de Novers.] For report goes that there was there instead of
a cross a post set up between two other posts, and a beam stretched
across the midst post and attached to the other on either side.
And as we afterwards discovered, from the marks of the wounds and
of the bands, the right hand and foot had been tightly bound and
fastened with cords, but the left hand and foot were pierced with
two nails. Now the deed was done in this way, lest it should be
discovered, from the presence of nail-marks in both hands and both
feet, that the murderers were Jews and not Christians, if eventually
the body were found. [Both hands and feet were not nailed lest it
look like a crucifixion.]

But while in doing these things they were adding pang to pang and
wound to wound, and yet were not able to satisfy their heartless
 cruelty and their inborn hatred of the Christian name, lo! after all
these many and great tortures, they inflicted a frightful wound in his
left side, reaching even to his inmost heart, and, as though to make an
end of all, they extinguished his mortal life so far as it was in their
power. [Jesus was similarly pierced by a lance while nailed to the
cross. The chronicler here imitates the Apostle John's narrative.] And
since many streams of blood were running down from all parts
of his body, then, to stop the blood and to wash and close the
wounds, they poured boiling water over him.

Thus then the glorious boy and martyr of Christ, William, dying
the death of time in reproach of the Lord's death, but crowned with
the blood of a glorious martyrdom, entered into the kingdom of
glory on high to live for ever. Whose soul rejoiceth blissfully in
heaven among the bright hosts of the saints, and whose body by the
omnipotence of the divine mercy worketh miracles upon earth. . . .
[St. William after his death worked many miracles that brought streams of people to his shrine.]

As a proof of the truth and credibility of the matter we now adduce something which we have heard from the lips of Theobald, who was once a Jew, and afterwards a monk. He verily told us that in the ancient writings of his fathers it was written that the Jews, without the shedding of human blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. [There is no such statement in Jewish law or literature.] Hence it was laid down by them in ancient times that every year they must sacrifice a Christian in some part of the world to the Most High God in scorn and contempt of Christ, that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ's death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were in exile as slaves in a foreign land. [The Jews rejected Jesus and were as a result punished by exile from Palestine. Angry, they took revenge by secretly crucifying Christian children—thus Theobald. This libel is reminiscent of Apion, an Alexandrian writer of the first century.] Wherefore the chief men and Rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assemble together at Narbonne, where the Royal seed [resides], and where they are held in the highest estimation, and they cast lots for all the countries which the Jews inhabit; and whatever country the lot falls upon, its metropolis has to carry out the same method with the other towns and cities, and the place whose lot is drawn has to fulfill the duty imposed by authority. [Lots are cast in Narbonne, France, where Jews had a “king” to decide which city was to seize the Christian victim.]

Now in that year in which we know that William, God's glorious martyr, was slain, it happened that the lot fell upon the Norwich Jews, and all the synagogues in England signified, by letter or by message, their consent that the wickedness should be carried out at Norwich. “I was,” said he, “at that time at Cambridge, a Jew among Jews, and the commission of the crime was no secret to me. But in process of time, as I became acquainted with the glorious display of miracles which the divine power carried out through the merits of the blessed martyr William, I became much afraid, and following the dictates of my conscience, I forsook Judaism, and turned to the Christian faith.”

These words—observe, the words of a converted Jew—we reckon to be all the truer, in that we received them as uttered by one who
was a converted enemy, and also had been privy to the secrets of our enemies.

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25.
The Ritual Murder Accusation at Blois
May, 1171

IN 1171 the Jews of Blois, France, were accused of having crucified a Christian child during the Passover holydays and of having thrown the corpse into the Loire. This is the first time that the accusation of ritual murder was made in continental Europe. It is difficult to account for its occurrence just at this time unless it is a reverberation of the William of Norwich tale of a generation before. The accusation that Jews require Christian blood for their Passover ritual has been made against the Jews from that time on down to the present day in practically all lands and has cost the lives of hundreds of innocent Jewish men, women, and children.

The following account of the burning of over thirty men and women at Blois is taken from A Book of Historical Records, a Hebrew historical work of Ephraim ben Jacob (1132—about 1200), a German Jewish Talmudist and poet of note.

(What shall we say before God? What shall we speak? How can we justify ourselves? God must have found out our iniquity.

In the year 4931 [1171], evil appeared in France, too, and great destruction in the city of Blois, in which at that time there lived about forty Jews. It happened on that evil day, Thursday, toward evening, that the terror came upon us. A Jew [Isaac bar Eleazar] rode up to water his horse; a common soldier—may he be blotted out of the book of life—was also there watering the horse of his master. The Jew bore on his chest an untanned hide, but one of the corners had become loose and was sticking out of his coat. When, in the gloom, the soldier’s horse saw the white side of the hide, it was frightened and sprang back, and it could not be brought to water.

The Christian servant hastened back to his master and said: “Hear, my lord, what a certain Jew did. As I rode behind him toward the river in order to give your horses a drink, I saw him throw a little Christian child, whom the Jews have killed, into the water. When I saw this, I was horrified and hastened back quickly for fear he might kill me too. Even the horse under me was so scared.
frightened by the splash of the water when he threw the child in that it would not drink.” The soldier knew that his master would rejoice at the fall of the Jews, because he hated a certain Jewess, influential in the city. He as much as put the following words into his master’s mouth: “Now I can wreak my vengeance on that person, on that woman Pulcelina.”

The next morning the master rode to the ruler of the city, to the cruel Theobald, son of Theobald—may his unrighteousness and bitter, evil curses fall upon his head. He was a ruler that listened to falsehood, for his servants were wicked. [Theobald V was Count of Blois, 1152–1191. He was called “the Good.”]

When he heard this he became enraged and had all the Jews of Blois seized and thrown into prison. But Dame Pulcelina encouraged them all, for she trusted in the affection of the ruler who up to now had been very attached to her. However, his cruel wife, a Jezebel, swayed him, for she also hated Dame Pulcelina. [Theobald’s wife was Alix, the daughter of King Louis VII of France.] All the Jews had been put into iron chains except Pulcelina, but the servants of the ruler who watched her would not allow her to speak to him at all, for fear she might get him to change his mind.

The ruler was revolving in his mind all sorts of plans to condemn the Jews, but he did not know how. He had no evidence against them until a priest appeared—may he be destroyed and may his memory be uprooted from the land of the living—who said to the ruler: “Come, I’ll advise you how you can condemn them. Command that the servant who saw the Jew throw the child into the river be brought here, and let him be tested by the ordeal in a tank of water to discover if he has told the truth.”

The ruler commanded and they brought him, took off his clothes, and put him into a tank filled with holy water to see what would happen. If he floated, his words were true; if he sank, he had lied. Such are the laws of the Christians who judge by ordeals—bad laws and customs by which one cannot live! The Christians arranged it in accordance with their wish so that the servant floated, and they took him out and thus they declared the wicked innocent and the righteous guilty. [In this ordeal the normal procedure appears to have been reversed. Generally the innocent sank and the guilty floated.]

The ruler had started negotiations for a money settlement before the coming of the priest who incited the ruler not to accept any ransom for the dead child. [In the Middle Ages many crimes could be expiated legally through a money payment.] He had sent a Jew
The Church and the Jew

to the Jews [of the other communities] and had asked how much they would give him. The Jews consulted with their Christian friends and also with the Jews in the dungeon, and these latter advised offering only one hundred pounds and in addition their uncollected debts amounting to the sum of one hundred eighty pounds. [The Jews objected to paying high ransoms lest the Christians should find it profitable to imprison Jews.]

In the meantime the priest arrived on the scene, and from this time on the ruler paid no attention to the Jews and did not listen to them, but only to the instruction of the priest. In the day of wrath money could not help them. At the wicked ruler's command they were taken and put into a wooden house around which were placed thornbushes and faggots. As they were led forth they were told: "Save your lives. Leave your religion and turn to us." They mistreated them, beat them, and tortured them, hoping that they would exchange their glorious religion for something worthless, but they refused. Rather did they encourage each other and say to one another: "Persist in the religion of the Almighty!" [A Christian historian of that time says that some did convert.]

At the command of the oppressor they then took the two [Jewish] priests, the pious Rabbi Jehiel, the son of Rabbi David Ha-Kohen, and the just Rabbi Jekutiel Ha-Kohen, the son of Rabbi Judah, and tied them to a single stake in the house where they were to be burned. They were both men of valor, disciples of Rabbi Samuel and Rabbi Jacob [the grandsons of Rashi]. They also tied the hands of Rabbi Judah, the son of Aaron, and then set fire to the faggots. The fire spread to the cords on their hands so that they snapped, and all three came out and spoke to the servants of the oppressor: "The fire has no power over us. Why should we not go free?" [Since these three had withstood the ordeal by fire, they asked to be freed.]

The enemy answered: "By our lives! You shall not get out." They kept on struggling to get out but they were pushed back into the house. They came out again and seized hold of a Christian to drag him along with them back onto the pyre. When they were right at the fire the Christians pulled themselves together, rescued the Christian from their hands, killed them with their swords, and then threw them into the fire. Nevertheless they were not burnt, neither they nor all those thirty-one persons. Only their souls were released by the fire; their bodies remained intact. When the Christians saw it they were amazed and said to one another: "Truly these are saints."

A certain Jew by the name of Rabbi Baruch, the son of David,
a priest, was there and saw all this at that time with his own eyes. He lived in the territory of that ruler and had come there to arrange terms for the Jews of Blois, but, because of our sins, he had no success. However, a settlement was made by him for one thousand pounds to save the other Jews of that accursed ruler. He also saved the scrolls of the Torah and the rest of their books. This happened in the year 4931 on Wednesday, the 20th of the month of Siwan [May 26, 1171]. This day ought to be established as a fast day like the Fast of Gedaliah. [The assassination of Gedaliah, who was governor of Judah after the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E., is still observed on the 3rd of Tishri.] All these facts were written down by the Jews of Orleans—a city close by that of the martyrs—and made known to the teacher, our master Rabbi Jacob [ben Rabbi Meir, Rashi's grandson, the greatest French rabbi of his day. He died in the third week after the Blois burning].

It was also reported in that letter that as the flames mounted high the martyrs began to sing in unison a melody that began softly but ended with a full voice. The Christian people came and asked us: “What kind of a song is this for we have never heard such a sweet melody?” We knew it well for it was the song: “It is incumbent upon us to praise the Lord of all.” [This prayer, the Alenu, or Adoration, now recited daily, was then a New Year’s prayer with a special melody.]

O daughters of Israel, weep for the thirty-one souls that were burnt for the sanctification of the Name, and let your brothers, the entire house of Israel, bewail the burning.

Because of our sins these men were not even given a Jewish burial but were left at the bottom of the hill on the very spot where they had been burnt. It was only later the Jews came and buried their bones. There were about thirty-two holy souls who offered themselves as a sacrifice to their Creator; and God smelled the sweet savor, for him whom He has chosen does He cause to come nigh unto Him. [The number of those burnt varies in different sources. One source lists a new-born babe.]

Of their own free will all the communities of France, England, and the Rhineland observed Wednesday, the 20th of Siwan, 4931, as a day of mourning and fasting. This was also the command of our great teacher Jacob, the son of Rabbi Meir, who wrote letters to them informing them that it was proper to fix this day as a fast for all our people, and that it must be greater even than the Fast of Gedaliah ben Ahikam; it was to be like the Day of Atonement [a twenty-four hour fast].