4 Saintly and Satanic Obstetricians

Published by

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate.
Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture.

Directions For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68527
In a special cult in seventeenth-century Swabia, Saint Roch, the fourteenth-century saint generally in charge of plague victims, came to function as a “celestial gynecologist.” This new competency assigned to him was due to an iconographic confusion that, by analogy, interpreted Saint Roch’s plague wound (usually located on his upper thigh) as the female genitalia. To many childless and suffering women the shape of the wound apparently recalled their own organs, which were the cause of their distress. The development of the special cult of Saint Roch as gynecologist thus centered on the idea of a wound or opening, which also appeared on votive offerings in chapels dedicated to Saint Roch: these were metal toads with baby faces and large vulvalike openings on their backs believed to be substitutes for representations of the uterus. The imagery of this cult thus was sexually charged. Saint Roch’s gesture could also suggest that he was pointing to his own genitals: consequently, the worshipers who adopted this cult saw male and female sexuality represented in the same figure. In an additional twist to this complicated pattern, the next step in the development of this cult consisted in the association of the toad with the viper or dragon of Saint Margaret, the special patron saint of childbearing women. The sexual significance of the dragon in the story of her martyrdom is obvious: he represented the enemy of her chastity, and he was split open through her prayers. It appears that an analogy between the dragon’s and the toads’ wounds was established in the popular imagination. As a result, chastity and sexuality could be represented simultaneously in one and the same votive offering.
From this example, illustrating the working of the popular religious imagination, two points emerge that are important to the study of Caesarean birth and that will structure this chapter: the roles of some saints and the Virgin as obstetricians and the creation of rather bizarre analogies that may have led to the depiction of the Antichrist’s birth as a Caesarean.

“APERTURA MIRABILIS”: MIRACULOUS CAESAREANS

If in the official writings of the church pregnant women found few sympathetic supporters, miracle collections offered more comfort. In addition to the Virgin, some saints, for example Saint Margaret or Saint Hyacinth, were special patrons of childbirth. Others helped in childbirth only occasionally. In both categories we find a few miracles in which mothers survived a Caesarean delivery (usually of a dead fetus).

The Virgin was in charge of aiding women in all sorts of misfortunes surrounding childbirth. In one case, a woman lost her child accidentally after the death of her husband; now unprotected, she was accused of having performed an abortion. After being thrown by her accusers from a bridge she was rescued from the torrents by Notre Dame de Rocamadour. This miracle not only illustrates the powers of the Virgin but paints a rather dark picture of a pregnant woman’s fate without the protection of her husband. In the case of an accident to the fetus she is left at the mercy of her husband’s family who, in this particular story, only debate the ways to get rid of her (fire or water?), not the question of her guilt or innocence.

The Virgin of Rocamadour was a preferred patroness of childbirth. In one of her miracles a woman is delivered by a Caesarean. In order to give the flavor of this type of miracle I will translate it in its entirety:

Of a woman who suffered every day the pangs of childbirth. I cannot omit an astonishing and curious miracle of a kind that one has never heard of before. A woman of the country of the Goths had been pregnant for almost thirty months; every day she was tormented by the pangs of childbirth but could not give birth. Her parents, of whom she was the only child, belonged to the confraternity of Notre-Dame de Rocamadour. Their sorrow was immense, they could not stop crying; it was as if their daughter were already dead. Those who heard tell of such a new and awful sickness were astonished; those who saw the sick woman were filled with pity. This
terrible act by God induced fear in all those who saw it because it seemed that He had forgotten his own pity and the woman’s weakness. In this poor woman the words were fulfilled “in pain you shall bring forth children.” But she would have been only too happy to give birth even though childbirth is painful, and she would have been happy, considering that pain [i.e., of giving birth] as nothing. Therefore she ardently desired to die, even though death is full of bitterness and she proclaimed those who could die happy. For she was dying alive and considered death sweeter than her pain because death lasts only a moment. At the moment of giving birth every woman is, in a sense, at death’s door; what pain, then, must this woman have felt who suffered continually the pangs of childbirth? Clearly, this was the greatest pain ever endured by any woman. Her parents tried to move to compassion the merciful Mother of God, knowing well that fervent and constant prayer penetrates the heavens and pacifies the supreme Judge. Since the illness was extraordinary it could only be cured in an extraordinary manner by the faithful physician. Miraculously the stomach of the poor woman opened, contrary to nature and without the help of a doctor. The dead and already putrid child was extracted in pieces and the mother was completely healed. She came to the church of Rocamadour to give thanks to her benefactress. And since she belonged to that uncouth nation that does not know any shame she gladly showed her still open wound. She did not stop singing the praise of the powerful Virgin.7

The last detail, that of showing the wound, is extremely important in the context of childbirth miracles. This type of miracle was problematic from several points of view. First, if the birth was the answer to a prayer for fertility, it was difficult to link it directly to a saint’s shrine, since it took place nine months later and often at quite a distance from the shrine.8 Second, usually no visible mark remained that could be shown in thanksgiving to the saint or Virgin. An abdominal delivery thus plays a special role. Even though the showing of the wound or scar may be considered immodest, it nevertheless fulfills the all-important function of giving visible proof of a miracle.9

If in the miracle of Rocamadour the woman shows off her still-open wound, the heroine of a miracle of Saint Vulframus can show more restraint: her wound is just sufficiently healed to be decent, but, the hagiographer specifies, “the sign of the division remained so that God’s virtue and that of his servant [Saint Vulframus] would forever be manifest.”10 Nothing in Saint Vulframus’s life especially qualified him for aiding pregnant women. The most notable deed of this eight-century bishop had been the conversion of Frisia. The list of his miracles includes the usual collection of children revived after drowning, sailors rescued in
a storm at sea, and soldiers protected during battle. And yet, in this one case, his saintly intervention leads to an obstetrical procedure described in unusual detail; in that, this miracle differs dramatically from the more general and conventional descriptions used for the saint’s other miracles. Here is the most dramatic moment: “After insistent prayers [to Saint Vulfram] her belly was swelling up from the pectoral bone to the navel when—wonderful to tell—it divided itself across the middle like a field newly plowed. Her cries made people flock around and look at her without modesty. After some consultation they opened her belly further and pulled the flesh and bones of the putrid child out of the half-dead woman’s body. When this was done, the woman again prayed to the saintly patron who had delivered and completely healed her.”11 Her scar, the visible sign of her salvation, remains and she shows it to anyone who wants to see it. From this miracle it becomes clear that a Caesarean was considered the last resort for a woman suspected of being pregnant with a dead fetus. Even though the location of the incision does not seem to be accurate, the details suggest some familiarity, on the hagiographer’s part, with such procedures.

A similar miraculous deed (gesta miracula), this time performed by a church father who was also a medicus, Paul of Merida in Lusitania, is recorded for the seventh century. At the time when Paul is bishop of Merida the wife of one of the noblemen of the city falls sick: her child has died in her womb. After having lost all confidence in physicians, the husband approaches Paul. Interestingly, the husband first approaches him because Paul is a holy man, not because he is a physician. Paul first refuses to heal her with his own hands lest “wicked men will throw this matter up to me.” He finally relents, prays a whole day at the church of the virgin Saint Eulalia, and then “laid his hands on the sick woman in the name of the Lord, and, trusting in God, very carefully made a very small incision with a sharp scalpel and withdrew in sections, member by member, the already corrupt body of the infant. The woman, already almost dead and only half-alive, he at once restored safely to her husband with the help of God and bade her henceforth not to know her husband: for at whatever time she should know the embraces of her husband worse perils would come upon her. Nevertheless they fell at his feet and thanked him and promised to observe in detail everything the man of God had commanded.” Prayers and immense joy follow this miraculous deliverance.12

This incident is one of the extremely rare detailed accounts of a Caesarean for late antiquity. What is remarkable here is that the woman’s
body is not opened miraculously but rather that divine support is given to a medical procedure that is executed by a bishop-physician. By repeating the word *subtilis* (subtle or careful) the author insists on the extreme skill necessary for such an operation: “mira subtilitate incisionem subtilissiam subtili cum ferramento fecit.”13 Paul also gives advice to the couple that is clearly in the interest of the woman. Although newly married, she does not have to pay the “marital debt” at the risk of a future pregnancy that could endanger her life. This story highlights not only the miraculous powers of a holy physician but also shows great comprehension of women’s risks and problems by integrating the perils of intercourse and pregnancy into a compassionate and nonmisogynistic context.

The degree of direct saintly participation varies in all these stories. On the whole, there is a progression from divinely guided medical intervention to pure miracle. While Paul of Merida performed the Caesarean himself, albeit with the help of God, Saint Vulframus intervenes only partially, that is, he opens up the woman’s abdomen only to indicate what kind of procedure is needed; the operation of removing the fetus is performed by humans. But in the most recent story, that of Notre-Dame of Rocamadour, the Virgin seems to do most of the “work” and any human help is hidden under some vague passive constructions (*puer . . . extractus est*), “the boy was extracted”.

Another miracle story (and especially its transformation) gives us further insight into the conditions of medieval marriage and pregnancy. It is a story of love, jealousy, and suicide. A husband teases his pregnant wife by claiming to have a mistress much more beautiful than she. “If this is true,” his wife retorts, “I will pierce myself with this knife.” The husband, whose sense of humor is questionable, insists that it is so. Without hesitation the wife plunges the knife into her uterus in order to kill herself and the child. Suddenly the husband realizes what is happening; he starts beating his chest and tearing his hair: he now knows that he has lost not only his wife but also his child. In vain he tries to extract the knife and prays ardently to the Virgin. As his wife’s body is perforated by the knife, so, he states in his prayer, his own body is now perforated by pain. Without delay the Virgin answers his prayer and the husband now can extract the knife which had pierced the woman’s spine. Everyone weeps and the woman is saved. The husband whose callousness caused the entire disaster is seen as a repentant sinner; the wife is, all along, a victim (if a strong-minded one).14

A fourteenth-century transformation of this twelfth-century story
SAINTLY AND SATANIC OBSTETRICIANS

The Birth of the Antichrist

Images of the Antichrist's birth by Caesarean first appeared in German woodcuts in the second half of the fifteenth century. These woodcuts were used in a rather restricted area: roughly in the triangle formed by Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Strasbourg. One of the woodcuts (fig. 24) made its way to Spain. Figures 22–27 show all the major versions found...
22. The birth of the Antichrist (*Endkrist*, Collection Otto Schäfer, fol. 2v)
23. The birth of the Antichrist (Entkrift, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Xyl. 1, fol. 2r)
24. The birth of the Antichrist (*El libro del Anticristo*, New York, NYPL *KB +1496, fol. 5)
25. The birth of the Antichrist (Seelenwurzburg, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, PML 199 Ch L f 490, fol. dd6v)
in block books as well as in printed books. Even though these images are part of a purely iconographic tradition, only a combined study of both the textual and the iconographic traditions of the Antichrist's birth will provide a clue to these rather bizarre images in which devils function as midwives and mothers are depicted with gaping wounds in their stomachs. The body of primary and secondary works dealing with the Antichrist is immense; I will therefore concentrate on those textual elements that emphasize the context and manner of the Antichrist's conception and birth.
From the beginning, the Antichrist’s life was defined both as analogous and opposite to Christ’s: he would imitate Christ in a perverted manner. Before the creation of a coherent legend of the Antichrist’s life, or a vita, some details about the Antichrist’s birth appeared in a commentary on the Apocalypse (first century A.D.) where his emergence was equated with the rising of the beast out of the abyss described in Rev. 11:7. Early on, the Antichrist was also linked to the tribe of Dan as it appears in Jacob’s benediction and prophecy: “Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper in the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that the rider falls backward” (Gen. 49:17). This image captured the medieval imagination; it appears in countless passages of the church fathers as well as in vernacular texts. In the third century the exegetes Irenaeus and Hippolytus provided a first codification of some important traits of the Antichrist’s life: the Antichrist is Satan’s son; in every detail he is the opposite of Christ and the church. This last idea opened the door to a variety of historical interpretations: the Antichrist is a Jew, a heretic, or, later on, a Moslem. But it also gave the impetus for the creation of a vita for the
Antichrist that would resemble in its structure the traditional saint’s life that in turn was modeled on the Life of Christ. The late-seventh-century Syrian writer known as Pseudo-Methodius was the first to use at least some elements of a vita. He specified that the Antichrist would be born in Chorozaim, would be raised in Capernaum, and would reign in Bethsaida. He also used the image of the Antichrist as the viper of the tribe of Dan. Pseudo-Methodius’s text, together with other exegetical and popular traditions, strongly influenced one of the most important works on the Antichrist: the *Libellus de ortu et de tempore Antichristi* written by Adso of Montier-en-Der about 950. Details from this text were perpetuated endlessly in both the learned and the popular medieval treatises on the Antichrist.

Here is Adso’s version of the Antichrist’s birth:

But now let us consider the origin of Antichrist. The source of my information is not my own imagination or invention; rather I found all this in written works after careful research. My authorities say that Antichrist will be born from the tribe of Dan, according to the words of the prophet: “Dan is like a snake by the road side, an adder on the path” [Gen. 49:17]. For he will sit like a serpent by the road side, and he will be on the path to strike those who walk on the paths of righteousness [Ps. 23:3] and kill them with the venom of his malice. He will be born as the result of sexual intercourse of his mother and father, like other men, and not, as some say from a virgin alone. But he will be conceived entirely in sin [Ps. 51:5], he will be engendered in sin, and he will be born in sin [John 9:34]. At the very beginning of his conception, the devil will enter with him into his mother’s womb, and by the devil’s strength he will be fostered and protected in his mother’s womb, and the devil’s strength will be with him always. And just as the Holy Ghost came into the womb of the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and covered her with his strength and filled her with divinity, so that she conceived from the Holy Ghost and what was born was divine and holy [Luke 1:35]: so also the devil will go down into the womb of Antichrist’s mother and fill her completely, possess her completely inside and out, so that she will conceive by man with the devil’s assistance, and what is born will be completely foul, completely evil, completely ruined. That is why that man is called the son of destruction [2 Thess. 2:3], because as far as he can he will destroy the human race, and he will himself be destroyed at the Last Judgment. Now you have heard about the manner of his birth; hear also the place where he is to be born. For just as our Lord and Savior preordained Bethlehem for Himself, the place where He put on humanity for us and deigned to be born, so the devil knows a fit place for this man of perdition called Antichrist, whence it is fitting that all evil will arise [1 Tim. 6:10], namely the city of Babylon [Rev. 18:10]. For in this community, which was once a famous and proud
city of the heathen [Isa. 13:19] and the capital of the Kingdom of the Persians, Antichrist will be born. It is said that he will be brought up and live in the towns of Bethsaida and Corozain; for the Lord condemns these towns in the Gospel with the words: “Woe to thee, Corozain, woe to thee, Bethsaida” [Matt. 11:21; Luke 10:13].

Adso’s text was widely known and quoted throughout the Middle Ages, because it provided a coherent narrative of the Antichrist’s life emphasizing that it was a counterpart to Christ’s life. That Adso mentioned three cities as the sites of the Antichrist’s birth and childhood caused some confusion and even led later commentators to simply equate Chorozaim and Babylon. Adso’s work found its way into one of the most popular spiritual encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, Honorius Augustodensis’s *Elucidarium.* Written in Latin in the early twelfth century, this work was translated into many vernacular languages and thus became a veritable storehouse for ideas on every kind of subject, including the life of the Antichrist. A German translation appeared at the end of the twelfth century and for the first time presented the term “Endkrist.” “Endkrist” emphasizes the Antichrist’s appearance at the end of times, rather than his being the opposite of Christ as implied by the term “Antichrist.” Despite the different name, though, Endkrist still figures as both Christ’s antitype and imitator in the German vitae.

The *Elucidarium* is set up as a dialogue between a master and his pupil. In answer to the pupil’s wish to hear something about the Antichrist, the master proffers the information that the Antichrist was born in Great Babylon of a prostitute of the tribe of Dan. In his mother’s womb he was already filled with the devil, and he was raised in Chorozaim by evil sorcerers. The phrase “magna Babylonia” used by Honorius reappears in the captions to the fifteenth-century block books where the Antichrist’s birthplace is identified as “Gross Babylon.”

One of the most explicit and lurid stories of the Antichrist’s birth can be found in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Scivias.* Even as a girl the Antichrist’s mother is full of all vices. The devil deceives her by acting like an angel and sending her into a kind of desert, where she—unbeknownst to her parents—leads a life of vice and dissolution. Hildegard’s terminology reaches a shrill pitch when she describes the conception of the Antichrist; he will be conceived in passionate fornication and his mother will not know who the father is. In a perverted imitation of the Virgin Mary, the Antichrist’s mother will then claim that she has known no man and people will believe her claims and call her holy.
Hildegard introduced a strong sexual element into the story of the Antichrist's conception. Before her version in the *Scivias*, the conception itself had not explicitly been viewed as perverse; rather, Adso had insisted on the fact that the Antichrist was conceived by human parents. The perversity had been implied by the devil's "descending" into the mother's uterus. This new tale of sexual license proved very influential. Later texts whose authors claim to use as their source the rather vague text of the *Compendium theologicum* show a clear tendency to embroider upon the sober facts found in the *Compendium*. The exact nature of the relationship of Antichrist to the devil was unclear. The *Compendium* on the one hand described the devil's role in the Antichrist's conception but then, in the following chapter, equated the two.

In a thirteenth-century French play, *Le jour du jugement*, Satan disguises himself as an attractive young man to lie with a young Jewish woman from Babylon, the future mother of the Antichrist. In an unusually explicit scene the mother suffers the pains of pregnancy and complains to a *damoiselle* who is sent to help her. With the aid of "Mahon" (Mohammed) the Antichrist is finally delivered and handed over to the devil for his education. Many details from the learned traditions show up in this convoluted version of the Antichrist's birth. No fewer than four of the manuscript illuminations show the details of the birth: the mother is shown pregnant, then in bed, covered by a blanket, while the *damoiselle* holds the Antichrist in diapers. In the third picture, the mother reaches out toward her baby and in the fourth the child stands on the bed while two devils watch. This mid-fourteenth-century illumination contains one element that becomes prominent in one type of the later German woodcuts: the devils standing around the mother's bed.

The same motif also appears in a manuscript (ca. 1465) of an early-fourteenth-century German text called *Die Erlösung* (the Redemption), which belongs to a different tradition of depicting the Antichrist's birth. The little Antichrist is dark-skinned; his mother is an old woman. The *Jour du jugement* and the *Erlösung* represent some of the other iconographic possibilities available for the depiction of the Antichrist's birth.

Two other texts (one of them illustrated) can be considered as preliminary steps in the formation of the iconographic tradition showing the Antichrist's birth by Caesarean: the Velislaus Bible and Berengier's *De l'avènement Antecrist*. The famous fourteenth-century *Veluslae biblia picta* is a fascinating biblical picture book. Of the 747 pen-and-ink drawings,
twelve belong to a cycle about the Antichrist. As Karel Stejskal indicates in his introduction, “the literary model for them was found in chapters VII–IX of the work Compendium totius theologiae veritatis . . . a popular book in Bohemia.” But one crucial element is added to the text of the Compendium; in the caption above the picture of the Antichrist’s birth (fol. 130) we read: “Nascet autem in babylonia de tribu dan et erunt diabli obstetrices” (the devils shall be midwives). The picture indeed shows two devils as midwives: in the center, one holds the swaddled infant in place on top of a low column; on the left, the other stands with outstretched arms at the head of the mother’s bed. The guardian angel (soon to be dismissed) stands on the other side. Thus, even though we do not yet see a Caesarean, the devilish midwives have already entered the iconographic pattern of the Antichrist’s birth.

But there is another image, on the facing page (fol. 131), that iconographically resembles scenes of Caesarean birth: the Antichrist’s circumcision. The circumcision is already mentioned in Haimo of Auxerre’s bible commentary38 and in the Compendium theologicae, which provides most of the captions for the Velislai Bible. But the text is modified here so that the purpose of the circumcision is no longer the perverse imitation of Christ but simply “to confirm the law of the Jews.” The long-haired Antichrist, looking like a woman, is stretched out in a manner reminiscent of many of the Caesarean scenes we studied in Chapter 2. A group of Jews, recognizable by their hats, stands around him; one of them wields a large knife. The place he is aiming for is of course very close to the place where the incision for a Caesarean would be made. The juxtaposition of the birth and circumcision, then, is extremely suggestive and may have led to some kind of iconographic contamination.

Another element shown graphically in the German woodcuts, that of incest between a father and daughter, appears in Berengier’s thirteenth-century French version of the Antichrist’s birth. Based loosely on Honorius’s Elucidarium, the De l’avènement Antecrist tells of the Antichrist’s conception: the mother is not only a prostitute (Honorius’s meretrix) of the tribe of Dan but also incestuously involved with her father. Berengier contrasts this perverse conception with the virgin birth of our Lord. He also dwells on the perversity of the Antichrist’s family relationships: his father is his grandfather, he points out, and his mother is his sister—no wonder, then, that the son grows into a “cruel dragon.”

The equation of the Antichrist with a dragon or serpent yields another piece of the Antichrist puzzle. The ninth-century encyclopedist Rabanus
Maurus deals with serpents and the Antichrist in his De universo.\textsuperscript{40} The quote from Gen. 49:17 provides the basis for a series of resemblances between the viper and the Antichrist. The most important passage for our purposes is the one on the viper’s perverse methods of conceiving and giving birth. During the sexual act the male sticks his head into the female’s mouth; she bites it off at the moment when the male emits the semen. When the young ones are ready to be born they do so in an unnatural manner: they break through the sides of the mother and thus kill her. As a result, Rabanus concludes, both father and mother die in the act of procreation: the father during conception, the mother during birth. This text formed part of later bestiaries and was known in the vernacular through works like Brunetto Latini’s Livres dou Trésor.\textsuperscript{41} Here, as in Rabanus’s text, the voluptuous and libidinous nature of the vipers is stressed. The young vipers are accused of having caused their parents’ death. A similar accusation is leveled against Julius Caesar in Jean Mansel’s Histoires romaines where one of the explanations of the name Caesar reads: “because he killed his mother at birth.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus a chain of ideas is created that involves unnatural and destructive birth (by splitting open or by incision), the Antichrist-viper and Julius Caesar.

The equation between a Roman emperor and the Antichrist had, of course, been made much earlier in Apocalyptic writings and may have suggested, by a rather circuitous route, the manner of the Antichrist’s birth. As in a large number of other texts, the Roman emperors from Nero to Diocletian prefigure the Antichrist in the writings of Otto von Freising.\textsuperscript{43} A clear connection between Rome and the Antichrist appears in the twelfth-century German Ludus de Antichristo, where the worship demanded by the Antichrist recalls that of the Roman imperial cult. The view of Rome as a new Babylon (the supposed birthplace of the Antichrist) also contributed to the idea of the Antichrist as a Roman emperor. While for some writers, such as Otto, Babylon was the Antichrist’s place of origin only in the tropological sense, others took this indication literally.\textsuperscript{44} Even Christian Rome was called a new Babylon in the tropological exegesis of 1 Pet. 5:13: “She who is at Babylon . . . sends you greetings.”\textsuperscript{45} In typological thinking, the Roman emperor most frequently associated with the Antichrist was Nero. Now, Nero had been known for cutting open his mother in order to see where he came from. This cruel action was the subject of many medieval manuscript illuminations that iconographically often resembled images of Caesarean section.
All this diverse material, then, came to form part of both the learned and the popular imagination in the later Middle Ages, and it was from these complex textual and iconographic traditions that a German illustrator of the fifteenth century formed the idea to depict the Antichrist’s birth as a Caesarean section.

How closely does a text’s illustration follow its contents? We saw in Chapter 2 that often the illustrations are quite independent of the text. For the iconographic tradition of the Antichrist’s birth, it seems that the illustrator often functioned as a commentator. His role varied in the three different types of books featuring images of the Antichrist’s birth as a Caesarean: block books (or xylographic books), chiroxylographic block books, and printed books. In block books the pages were printed from a single woodblock into which both text and image(s) were carved; text and image were most likely conceived and executed by the same person. In chiroxylographic books the images (and possibly a frame) were printed from a woodblock, while the text was filled in by hand by a scribe. Woodcuts in printed books were set into a page composed of movable type. The design and execution of woodcut illustrations were divided between the Reisser and the cutter. The Reisser “denotes the designer in relation to a print, strictly speaking the artist who draws with a pen on the block or on paper for transfer to a block.”46 In general, the Reisser (possibly in consultation with an overall designer or the author) would be the one to come up with the ideas for the content of a given illustration.

Thus in each category the relationship between text and image was slightly different. Block books are really not so much books as captioned woodcuts bound together. The emphasis is clearly on the image. For block books, image and text were most likely cut by the same person: the illustrator-author, who may have had some guidance from a learned “conceptualizer.” For printed books, the illustrator and the scribe or typesetter were most likely not identical. Nevertheless, one can assume that the illustrators read the text.

From these formal considerations some preliminary points emerge. The different layouts in books dealing with the Antichrist indicate that they were meant for different audiences. In block books the pictures tell the story; their layout resembles modern comic books. As Rudolf Hirsch observes, they were mostly bought by “unsophisticated people, of whom
many may have been illiterate or semi-literate." In printed books, the illustrations were generally subordinated to the text and one can assume that their audience was more literate.

For the illustrations of the Antichrist's birth this distinction poses some interesting problems: if the illustrators functioned indeed as commentators, how did they translate their "commentaries" for these different target groups? And how can the relationship between the different texts and their illustrations be described? And most important, since the texts themselves do not contain any references to Caesarean birth, how did the illustrators come up with the many variations on this theme?

The idea of the Antichrist's birth as a Caesarean was created in the medieval imagination from many different sources, and one should not look for a single text that inspired its (or others texts') illustrations. Many early manuscripts of the Apocalypse show a trend toward incorporating material into their illustrations that is not present in the texts' narrative lines. Thus many of the metaphors surrounding the Antichrist's life had been brought to life in the illustrations. If he was the "son of destruction" (filius perditionis), what better way was there to show his destructiveness from the very beginning of his life than by having him kill his mother simply by being born?

Certain currents of thought can be activated at a given point and become what Gosbert Schüssler calls bildwirksam, or iconographically active. This was clearly the case for the Antichrist's birth by Caesarean. The second half of the fifteenth century suddenly saw a proliferation of these images.

The iconographic tradition of the Antichrist's birth by Caesarean shows two principal versions: the satanic version (devils acting as midwives or attendants) represented by figures 22–24, and the obstetrical version (figures 25–27), where there are no obvious clues to any satanic presence. The two versions are distinguished not only by the contents of the illustrations but also by the texts they accompany. Figures 22–24 all come from different versions of the German Endkrist, a popular legend drawn from the Elucidarium and its translations, the Compendium theologicae, and other sources. In these texts, the Antichrist's conception is usually incestuous: a scene showing an elderly man in bed with a young girl often precedes the scene of the Antichrist's birth. The caption indicates that this is a father incestuously wooing his lovely daughter. Of the few details given of his birth the most important is that he was born in
“Great Babylon.” This detail is either omitted or modified in the edifying treatise belonging to figures 25 and 27: the Seelenwurzgarten (The souls’ herb garden). As is explained in the prologue, this text does for the soul what herbs do for the body. Its version of the Antichrist’s birth comes from Hildegard of Bingen’s Scivias and therefore states that the Antichrist was conceived in a desert and born in mock-virgin birth (in an unspecified place). He was raised in the two cursed cities of Chorozaim and Bethsaida. Figure 26 comes from a Latin version of Pseudo-Methodius; here, Antichrist’s birthplace is Chorozaim, and Bethsaida is the place where he grew up.

One difference between the two versions emerges from this comparison of the accompanying texts: If the place of the Antichrist’s birth is specified as Babylon, as it is in the different versions of the Endkrist legend, devils are present at the scene of the Caesarean birth; if the Antichrist’s birthplace is given as Chorozaim or remains unspecified, the attendants at the birth are human and, for that matter, nothing in the images suggests that they show the Antichrist’s birth and not just any Caesarean birth.

In the earliest representation (fig. 22), from a chiroxylographic block book (ca. 1450), the mother’s twisted position suggests physical distress, which contrasts with the serene expression on her face. Her eyes seem to be open, yet they are averted from the child and the satanic midwife (called “bose hebam,” evil midwife, in a small caption). This detail immediately creates an intimacy between the devil and the infant; the mother is left out—her function has been fulfilled. In the picture below (on the same page) a very handsome grown-up Antichrist is flirting with two women. Above his head is perched a miniature version of the devilish midwife, a device that is used throughout the text to identify the Antichrist. Women’s roles are clearly delineated on this page: they give birth and die, or they become the objects of the Antichrist’s lascivious advances.

In figure 22, the mother still seemed to be alive, though on the point of death. In figures 23 and 24, there is no doubt that the mother has just died: a satanic creature is removing a tiny human figure, representing the soul, from the mother’s mouth. An angel hovers in the background, ready to receive the soul. The devotional gesture of the soul and the presence of the angel suggest that the mother will be saved and not be blamed for giving birth to the “son of perdition.” This is consonant with the Endkrist texts, which portray Antichrist’s mother as a victim of incestuous seduction. The violent blame and condemnation of the Anti-
christ’s mother on the grounds of her indiscriminate fornication and perverse claims to a virgin birth (evident in such texts as Hildegard’s *Scivias*) would, of course, preclude any depiction of salvation.

Unlike in many other images of Caesarean birth, the mothers here are shown fully dressed in flowing robes that are slit in front in the shape of the Caesarean incision. Significantly, no provisions common in other birth scenes (such as a tub with water or a warming fire) have been made for the newborn; instead, monsters stand ready to receive him. This may have been suggested by texts like *Le jour du jugement*, where the mother hands over her newborn Antichrist to the devils by saying: “I should render grace to Mohammed [for the devils’ offer of educating the child in their art] / I give him into your care.”

The Antichrist is thus shown to be in the hands of the devil (or devils) from the moment of his birth. In the preceding textual traditions, there were many indications that the devil “descended” into the mother’s womb after conception. The illustrators translated these indications into dramatic and frightening images. The mother’s (physical) “perdition” becomes evident in the fatal Caesarean section; but her spiritual salvation is assured through the angel’s presence. Her son is taken from her by satanic midwives and given to equally satanic educators.

The second group of illustrations (fig. 25–27), the obstetrical version, forms a striking contrast to the satanic versions of the birth scene. Here, there are only human attendants and the interior is a tranquil birth chamber. The death of the mother is not dramatized: no small human figure representing the soul escapes from the mother’s mouth. Significantly, the obstetrical version did not replace the satanic version but existed alongside it. The two versions, then, are examples of two different types of imagination and inspiration. The obstetrical version appears less explicitly symbolic and more realistic.

The two illustrations from the *Seelenwurzgarten* (figs. 25 and 27) show the undressed mother in bed; she is covered with a cloth up to the point from which the child emerges. This detail alone makes these images more realistic than those in the first group: no Caesarean section could be performed by cutting through a garment. The mother’s eyes are closed in figure 25, but open in figure 27. In both pictures she lies motionless. A midwife holds onto the mother’s left arm; an attendant gently lifts the child by the shoulders.

The pattern is slightly different in figure 26 (from the Pseudo-Methodius). Unlike in the other pictures, the baby is already delivered
here; wrapped in swaddling clothes, he is being cradled by the midwife. She wears the same type of turban as the midwives in figures 25 and 27. Another midwife, or attendant, lurks in the background. While the mothers’ faces in the previous illustrations looked rather serene, here her face is contorted; she seems to look at her stomach, slit open in the center. She pays little attention to the newborn, thus underlining, once again, the dissociation of the mother from the birth.

There is no suggestion of the mother’s spiritual salvation in these images. In the texts accompanying figures 25 and 27, the Seelenwurzgarten, the mother is condemned in the harsh terms used by Hildegard in her Scivias. Her death in childbirth may thus be seen as a punishment for her sins. But, at the same time, her early death seems to make her less responsible for her son’s future crimes. And what better way to make sure the audience understands that the mother vanishes early on (and thus relinquishes her responsibility) than to show the birth as a Caesarean?

What could have been the audience’s reaction to these images? It is possible that the obstetrical version was even more frightening than the satanic version. Does it not show that the Antichrist is “one of us,” that he can hide anywhere under normal human features? It seems that this less dramatic approach is more sophisticated and possibly intended for a different type of audience, an audience that can draw its own conclusions. This point is supported by the fact that the obstetrical versions come from printed books (even one Latin text), where the illustrations are more or less subordinated to the text. By contrast, most of the satanic scenes come from block books, whose picture-book layout indicates that they were meant for a less sophisticated audience. Thus, illustrators distinguished between their different target groups: for more sophisticated readers, the commentary was more implicit; the images called for greater capacities of interpretation. For the less sophisticated group, the drama of the Antichrist’s birth is spelled out more explicitly. The illustrations leave no doubt as to the devil’s direct involvement in the Antichrist’s birth. Also, the satanic versions come from texts that explicitly refer to Babylon as the Antichrist’s birthplace. It seems, then, that the illustrators who dealt with the primitive captions originating in the Elucidarium and the Compendium theologicae, created pictures that they saw as especially apt, given the reference to Babylon. In their function as commentators they elucidated the meaning of “Babylon” by including a variety of devils in their pictures. But the obstetrical version was a valid alternative to the satanic one. The crucial point is, of course, that illustra-
tors working for two essentially different audiences chose to depict the Antichrist’s birth as a Caesarean. Thus these illustrations reveal how late medieval culture conceived of Caesarean birth: it was seen, by at least one segment of this culture, as profoundly unnatural and destructive and hence worthy of being associated with the Antichrist’s birth. The circumstances of his birth differed, but the message sent by the illustrators was the same: whether delivered by human or devilish midwives, the Antichrist is in our midst and ready to seduce even the most faithful.

Caesarean birth was a reality in medieval and Renaissance Europe, but it also formed part of the *imaginaire*. The previous chapters traced the ideas on Caesarean birth in medicine and iconography and studied the roles of midwives or surgeons in the performance of the operation. This chapter has allowed us to place Caesarean birth into both the popular and the learned imagination. For the Antichrist’s birth in particular, the two currents interacted and produced a stunning visual representation of the birth of evil. By contrast, the miracles involving Caesarean birth focused on salvation. Since most of the fetuses delivered in these stories were dead, the mothers took center stage and their well-being constituted the essence of the miracle. The miracles dramatized the emergency situation in which most Caesareans take place; they highlighted the skill and devotion of the saintly obstetricians. They also emphasized the importance of a visible mark, the tangible proof of a successful miracle that, in normal childbirth, is absent from the mother’s body.

Saintly and satanic obstetricians, then, labored at the same task but with opposite results; while the former were instruments of salvation, the latter delivered evil and damnation. This contrast underlines the twofold nature of Caesarean birth, which we have observed in many different contexts: it encompasses good and evil, life and death, salvation and mutilation.