THE NUN’S PRIEST AND THE HEBREW POINTER

In a published article, A. T. Broes convincingly maintains that Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* often parodies the tale of the Prioress and satirizes the shortcomings of that ecclesiastical lady. Among the several parallels that Broes cites is one which suggests that Chaucntcleer’s account of a murder predicted in a dream ridicules intentionally the Prioress’ “mawkish tale of the little Christian boy who is murdered by a group of Jews and whose body is thrown in a privy”. Mr Broes also observes that the apprehension and punishment of Chauntecleer’s hosteler parodies the punishment of the Prioress’ Jews.

In connection with this parody of the Prioress’ account of the treatment of Jews, I here raise the question of the possibility that Chaucer may have known of an Anglo-Jewish collection of 107 animal fables (or 113, or six tales of doubtful attribution be by the same author) called “Mishle Shu’ alim”. Preserved in manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and at Munich, these fables are generally attributed to Berechiah Ben Natron ai Krespin Ha-Nakdan, a 12th-century Jewish scholar and exegete who is also called Benedict le Puncteur of Oxford.

According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, this collection dates from before 1268 and gives “in rimed prose most of the Beast Tales passing under the name of Aesop during the Middle Ages; but in addition to these, the collection also contains fables conveying the same plots and morals as those of Marie de France . . .”. It is perhaps especially notable that Marie’s “The Cock and the Fox” in MS Harleian 978, 56 — often cited as an analogue of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* — parallels Berechiah’s fable 26, and that Berechiah’s number 32 is entitled “Chicken and Fox”.

Joseph Jacobs cites the Nottingham Tallage Rolls for 5 Richard I as containing references to Berechiah and his work. Presumably, copies of some if not all of these records were on file in the Tower of London. The Jews in England were the personal property of the King, and their presence and financial activities afforded the ruler a considerable degree of pecuniary independence from a parliament with increasingly tight control of the national purse strings. Despite the royal favor the Jews enjoyed, however, they frequently suffered at the hands of the lesser nobility, who may well have instituted persecutions and massacres of the English Jews in order to recover or destroy evidence of the debts the Barons owed the money lenders. In the event of the death of one of his Jews, the King became the recipient of all the usurer’s outstanding debts. Costly experience had taught the English monarchs the value of a central repository for duplicate records of debts owing their Jewish financiers. As a safeguard against the loss of royal revenue, the Jews were required to deposit duplicate records of all their transactions in the Tower of London.

To these records Chaucer, as a trusted financial officer of the crown, would undoubtedly have had access. And it may well be that, through this or some other
agency, Chaucer had an inkling of the existence of a collection of beast fables recounted by a Jew.

If Broes is right in maintaining that the Nun’s Priest’s Tale answers that of the Prioresse, and if Chaucer knew of the Rabbi Berechiah’s having written fables belonging to the Renart cycle, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale may be an appropriate reply to the Prioresse at yet another level — a beast fable once told by a Jew answers an anti-Semitic Miracle of the Virgin.

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been noticed in the phrase “caught the people’s eyes”. But is there not also a pun on “eyes” — in the sense of casting a favourable vote? The second meaning of the line would therefore imply that Absalom is courting the people’s votes to be made King while at the same time pretending merely to be making a tour. This interpretation is strengthened by line 740 in which the double purpose of Absalom’s progress is mentioned: “And seem’d but pomp, did other ends disguise”.

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4. Munich MS 207.

A DISCIPLINE FOR DEACONS

T. J. WERTENBAKER published his The Puritan Oligarchy, in 1947, a “study of the Massachusetts Bible State”. In the course of the book Professor Wertenbaker discussed the duties of various church officers as described in the Platform of Church Discipline, which he inaccurately dates 1646. After summarizing the qualifications and tasks of pastor, teacher, and elder, he comes to the office of deacon, where the duties included the gathering and distribution of gifts. Then this comment: “Although the Church Discipline is thus clear as to their duties, it leaves us in doubt as to reasons why certain distinct qualifications were specified, such as their not being ‘double-tongued, not given to much wine, not given to filthy lucre” (pp. 63-64).

If the doubt has not been already resolved, let us do so now, more than twenty years after. The fact

“ABSAŁOM AND ACHITOPHEL“, LINES 739-740

This moving court, that caught the people’s eyes,
And seem’d but pomp, did other ends disguise.

In Absalom and Achitophel line 739, a possible pun on “court” has