CHAPTER SEVEN
THE JEWS, LEVITICUS, AND THE UNEFFECTIVE IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH BESTIARIES

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Medieval bestiaries are well-known and admired by both popular audiences and historians of medieval art chiefly for their lively illustrations of various beasts, birds, fishes, reptiles, and other subjects from the natural and imaginary worlds. Although the bestiary texts purport to describe the natural habits of the creatures pictured, more emphasis is placed on the spiritual significance of God’s creation through Christian allegorical interpretations of these habits. In effect, the bestiarists described animal behavior in ways that were contrived to yield specific moral lessons that would encourage both lay and religious readers to look to Nature to learn how to lead good Christian lives as well as to understand the mysteries of salvation history. For example, the father lion’s resuscitation of his stillborn cubs by breathing on them is compared to the resurrection of Christ. The flying fish’s loss of motivation to race against ships—and its subsequent sinking into the deep—is compared to those hard-working Christians who give up too soon and are dragged down to the depths by the devil. The tender care of their aging parents by hoopoe chicks demonstrates the fulfillment of the Scriptural mandate to “honor your father and mother” (Exod. 20:12).

Besides dispensing Christian morals, the bestiarists promoted a wide range of important theological ideas that informed contemporary social attitudes towards women, friends, enemies, marriage, and ecclesiastical and secular authorities, as I have discussed at length in my previous study of the English bestiaries. In that book I noted just a few of the

1 From a scholarly perspective, the two widely available English translations of Latin prose bestiaries are both unsatisfactory: T. H. White, Book of Beasts (London, 1954), a colloquial translation of the Cambridge Bestiary, and Richard Barber, Bestiary (Woodbridge [Suffolk], 1992), an abridged translation of Bodley MS. 764 (The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford).
2 White, Book of Beasts, 8–9 (leo), 199 (sera), 31–32 (epopus).
ways, both verbal and visual, that the Christian bestiariasts expressed negative attitudes towards Jews. It is to this aspect of the bestiary tradition that I return in the present essay, in order to examine in greater detail the key means by which Jews are evoked in the bestiaries, and how these characterizations fit into the wider arena of contemporary anti-Jewish polemic. I shall argue that the bestiaries, as well as the early Christian text of the Physiologus on which they were based, should be ranked among the most popular and widely-disseminated of Christian polemical texts directed against Jews. This is a function of the bestiaries that to date has been overlooked. In the space of this essay I am only able to provide a preliminary investigation of this thesis, which I hope will encourage a re-examination of the genre as an important witness to the changing Christian theological and social attitudes towards Jews that are corroborated in other contemporary theological, literary, and pictorial contexts.

As a key part of my argument for an essentially anti-Jewish character of the bestiaries, I shall explore the various ways that Christian ideas about Hebrew law informed their conception and formal structure. Most visible in this role is the Book of Leviticus, which is referred to both directly and indirectly in the bestiary texts. After noting some of the more general ways that Jews are described in the bestiaries, I shall devote the second part of this essay to an examination of selected references to Leviticus in both text and image in order to show how the Jews’ own laws were used against them. More precisely, I shall examine the Christian bestiariasts’ use of the dietary system outlined in Leviticus 11
