BOOK REVIEW


In the Yiddish collection of tales *Mayse-bukh*, printed in Basel in 1602, we find a fascinating tale titled “The Jewish Child who was Stolen by a Servant and Later Became Pope.”¹ It is the story, in brief, of the son of R. Simeon the Great of Mayence. The son is called Elhanan and, while still a child, he is kidnapped by a Christian, baptized, raised by priests, and taken to Rome, where he eventually becomes Pope. He never forgets, however, that he is a Jew, and the son of R. Simeon, and one day decides to write a letter to the bishop of Mayence, forbidding the Jews to keep the Shabbath, to circumcise their sons, and to use the ritual bath for the purification of women. All this is done in order to force his father to come to Rome as a representative of the Jewish community and ask for a revocation of the decree. Once in Rome, R. Simeon the Great is admitted into the presence of the Pope. They spend some time together disputing until the Pope invites R. Simeon to a game of chess and checkmates him. R. Simeon the Great is astonished. The Pope reveals his true identity and in the end succeeds in returning to Mayence and joining the faith of his fathers.

The legend is based on the figure of Pope Anacletus II (1130–1138), in actuality the great grandson of a rich Jew named Barukh who converted to the Christian faith. Elected Pope at a time in which the Church suffered from schismatic tendencies and when


I am very thankful to Gabriel Levin for revising the English translation.
Innocent II had been elected Pope by the adverse party, Anacletus was considered the Antipope and among the accusations brought against him was the fact of his Jewish ancestry. The present study offers a broad presentation of the historical background (see especially chapter 2, “Between History and Folklore—The Sources of the Legend of the Jewish Pope”).

Joseph Bamberger’s formation as a scholar has been largely in the field of thematology, having taken part in the project of the *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story* at Bar-Ilan University and contributing a number of entries. Consequently, in the first part of the book he analyzes the story of the Jewish Pope, in particular the Yiddish version that appears in the *Mayse-bukh*, firstly from the point of view of the sources and secondly from that of (a) the theme of the child who becomes a Pope—exemplified by the version included in Italo Calvino’s *Italian Folktales* under the title *Animal Speech*—and (b) the structure of the biography of the folk-hero as elaborated by Lord Raglan. In the second part of the book, Bamberger underlines elements that are peculiar to the Yiddish version expressing the strong tension between Jews and Christians; the important role played by the game of chess, which is, according to Sherman, “a metaphor for a spiritual battle,” the same “secret code” that exists between Joseph and his father “enabling the aged Jacob to know for certain that his long-lost son is indeed alive”; the fact that in the Yiddish version the hero does not commit *Kiddush HaShem*, as in the Hebrew sources of the same tale; and the substitution of the centrality of magic with that of hokhmà, ‘wisdom’.

Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to Markus Lehmann’s rewriting of the story in his *Rabbi Elchanan* (1867). This *mayse*, as other *mayses* he wrote, was composed with the didactic aim of teaching young German Jews the values of Orthodox Jewry.

This book offers a wide sampling of the thematological approach and will satisfy first of all scholars in the field of folklore and literary thematics, but it is also an important contribution to the history of

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