

VIRGIL THE MAGICIAN IN AN EARLY HEBREW TALE

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Hebrew literature in the Middle Ages was not restricted to theological and philosophical literature only. Mediaeval Jews, and likewise their gentile neighbours, loved a good story even if it had no relationship to religion; and, if such stories were created in the Christian world, Jews translated them into Hebrew. There was in the Middle Ages great interest in entertaining stories and in their accomplished recitation. This period also witnessed the creative development of the epic in both prose and poetry. Fortunately, Hebrew literature too did not exempt itself from taking an active part in this work. Understandably, our contemporary taste is sufficiently different that this creativity is neglected in our own day. From another perspective we should remember that a discernible portion of modern literature would have caused embarrassment and stimulated disgust in the "darkness" of the Middle Ages. However, if not for their innocent curiosity and preference for fine plot there would never have developed such classics as the *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*. One of the more famous mediaeval *novellae* which, however, does not fit our contemporary taste, even though it was popular among mediaeval readers and even artists, is the story of Virgil in the basket and his vengeance.

We uncovered this short story in a Hebrew manuscript. Even though the Hebrew version is a mechanical translation, it has literary value, and, for this reason, I have decided to publish it as written both as a contribution to the study of Virgil in the Middle Ages, to the enrichment of our knowledge

of mediaeval secular Hebrew literature, and finally -- I hope -- for the pure entertainment of the reader.

This short Hebrew story about Virgil is preserved in a large well known manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (MS. 2797 Hebr. 11). Although the first part of this manuscript has already appeared in English translation,¹ our story appears in the second part of the manuscript which has yet to be published. The manuscript is known as the "Chronicles of Jerahmiel," but actually the stories were collected and edited by a Jew known as Rabbi Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi² who lived in the Rhine region. This individual lived in the second half of the fourteenth century and thus supplies a *terminus ad quem* for our short story.

The modern designation "Chronicles of Jerahmiel" stems from the fact that Rabbi Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi included in his collection material that stemmed from the pen of Rabbi Jerahmiel ben Shlomoh.³ The latter, a scholar and liturgical poet (*payetan*), lived most likely in Italy. Part of his collection stemmed quite clearly from *Sepher Josippon*,⁴ a work which describes the history of Israel in the Second Temple period until the fall of Masada. *Sepher Josippon* was written in 953, and Jerahmiel therefore lived after that date. Some of his material appears in 'Arugat ha-Bosem of Rabbi Abraham ben 'Azriel of Bohemia,⁵ which was written in 1234. Jerahmiel wrote therefore sometime between 953 and 1234 and was an author of the eleventh or twelfth century.

The short story on Virgil is part of the "Chronicles of Jerahmiel." In order to ascertain the period of composition of this short Hebrew story, it is important to verify whether it was an integral part of Jerahmiel's collection or whether Rabbi Elazar ben Asher added it. In short, we know that the composer was an Italian, for, as we shall see, he added the Italian phrase *bonomini*.⁶

If Jerahmiel were an Italian Jew, then our composition is a product of Italy. Still, that does not prove that our author was Jerahmiel himself since his style differs from that of Jerahmiel as far as we can tell. It is clear that Rabbi Elazar ben Asher did not write this short story, not only because the author was an Italian and Rabbi Elazar ben Asher lived in the Rhine region, but also because the Hebrew of Rabbi Elazar is much poorer than that of our author, whose style is vibrant and natural. Therefore the story was written by an anonymous Italian Hebrew author and was already either part of Jerahmiel's collection or in the corpus of Elazar ben Asher.

Rabbi Elazar ben Asher organized the extant material as much as possible in chronological fashion. In addition he divided up the *Sepher Josippon*

which he found in the copy of Jerahmiel's manuscript and interwove with it other material which paralleled *Josippon's* various periods. In the "Chronicles of Jerahmiel" *Josippon* ends on folio 197a; the short subsequent entry on the dispersion of the Jews by Titus was already part of the manuscript of *Josippon* available to Jerahmiel; it is also found in other manuscripts of *Josippon*. Folios 197a-b contain an excursus on Josephus Flavius (Joseph ben Matityahu), his compositions, the family of Jesus, and other individuals from the dawn of Christianity. This section⁷ is based on Christian Latin sources and was apparently written by Jerahmiel himself. The succeeding Excursus (16 lines) is a folk tradition on the source of the prayer "ve-hu rahum." This tradition, found also in other documents,⁸ pertains to the dispersion of the Jews by Titus. Following it are two lines on the death of Titus, and next appears our story on Virgil the magician -- but with no mention of the poet's name, although it is placed in Titus's period. After our story is a passage (14 lines) based upon the talmudic tradition of the destruction of Beitar by Hadrian, who is mistakenly identified as Titus's heir. In the last line of this passage it says "The rest of the deeds of Hadrian are written in *Lamentations Rabba*." The remainder of this page is blank as is the following one, while on the next page is a copy of *Midrash Lamentations Rabba*. Thus the story is submerged within the chronological framework of "chronicles," and is placed in the days of Titus. It is impossible to ascertain if it was already integral to Jerahmiel's collection or if Rabbi Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi added it. The first possibility suggests that the source of the story is eleventh or twelfth century, while the second would designate the source in the thirteenth century. In either case, the author was an Italian Jew.

The story reads as follows:

And there was in the days of Titus the wicked a very wealthy man who had large houses and courtyards with gardens and towers. This man was among the nobles of Rome and his family was called *bonomini* in the language of Rome, and he had an exceedingly comely wife whose splendour was like the moon, and because of her beauty he built her a tower in his courtyard and she did not go forth from her house. [5] Once upon a time there was a wedding and they proceeded with tambourines and drums and continued with flute playing, and the dance was in the streets of the city unto the very tower in which this woman was present. And behold she heard the sound of the drums and the dance, looked out the window, and a certain man, a magician, saw her and began to lust for her. He

sent his servant to that tower to see if she descended from it during the night and he would lie in wait for her [10] continuously. And when he saw that she did not descend from there, he said, "What shall I do? If I go by myself it would be disastrous. What shall I do?" He wrote her a letter and sent it via a devil and indicated in his letter that it was his desire to come unto her. When morning came, she went to the window as was her custom and beheld the letter which was before her and her heart beat faster and she said, "What is this letter and whence did it come?" What did she do? She called to her maidservant and said to her, "Go fetch that scribe [15] in the courtyard." She went for him and called him and he came, and she said to him privately, "When I arose this morning, I found this letter by the window. Tell me what is written in it!" And he related to her the words of the letter. She said to him, "Write him an answer that I do not so desire and curse him!" A few days later her husband went on a long journey and commanded her not to leave her house with her maidservant. The magician heard that her husband had gone and sent her silver and gold and jewels [20] that she obey him. She said to her maidservants, "How mad is this man that he tempts me!" What did she do? She accepted the sum and sent to him saying, "I want you to come to me for I desire you, but I do not wish that you enter by the door, rather by the window." And so he should do and come in the darkness of the night. When he heard her words, he was overjoyed and from his great happiness he forgot his magical tricks and books. And he gazed upon the tower at night, and before he could come she went to another of her [25] husband's towers nearby and prepared a large basket with three intertwined ropes around it; and when the magician came they said to him, "Enter the basket and we shall pull it up." He entered and they pulled it halfway up the tower. Meanwhile she returned to the tower where she was originally, and they tied off the ropes on the inner walls of the tower and neither raised him nor lowered him. And the tower was high and he was hanging in mid air, and he was in the [30] basket for three days and three nights without food or drink, and he grew hungry and thirsty and sought to leap down from the basket. But when he would gaze down to the ground and would see how high it was from the ground, he feared lest he would die from the force of the fall nor could he ascend upwards, and the devils did not come

to him according to his custom because he could not command since he did not have his books with him and he did not know what to do. So he stood and was [35] astounded, while the passers by on the street continually looked at him and said to each other, "What is he doing hanging on the tower?" And they were quite amazed. And the young lads used to throw stones at him. And it came to pass on the third day and she approached the window and said to him, "So and so, how are you and how do you stand [come state]? Didn't you know that I was not a whore when you sent me your silver and gold and baubles? And now you have lost your fortune and your lust you did not [40] fulfill." And he pleaded with her and cried for the love of God to let him down to the ground so that he would not continue so in shame. And she said to him, "It is fitting to do so to men like you who desire to commit adultery with the wife of their friends" -- and she left him until the fourth day. And it came to pass on the fourth day that her mercy was stirred and she commanded to lower him to the ground. And when they had lowered him toward the ground approximately to the height of a tall man, they suddenly dropped the basket to the ground and his rib broke [45] from the force of the fall because he had fallen upon a stone, and he cried out; and people gathered about him for they heard his shout and they said to him, "What's with you?" And he feared to tell them the matter. And they accompanied him to his house with his rib wounded, and he ordered the doctors and they healed him.

When he regained his strength, he said to his servants, "I will avenge myself on this woman." And he commanded that his books of magic be brought before him. What did he do? He went and extinguished every fire throughout Rome [50] and all the surrounding villages with his magic, and no fire could be found throughout the kingdom of Rome. And if they were to bring any from another place either in stone or in wood, it would not reach more than a third of the way before it was extinguished. And even wood as large as beams or trees, all extinguished and many died from hunger for there was no bread in the city since there was no fire to light their ovens.

[55] And all the inhabitants of Rome came to the same agreement and took council with him where to find fire and what to do. After each had his say, the magician replied saying, "If it is your desire to give me a fortune and you promise me that you will not seize me

and you will do what I say to you, you shall find fire and live." And they said, "It will be done what you have spoken to do." And they gave him a great fortune. And when morning came to pass, behold the Romans came to him [60] and said, "Where is the fire which you are giving to us?" And he said to them, "Go to such and such a woman who has fire and she will give you!" So they went and he accompanied them and in the hand of each and everyone was a candle of wax. Then he said to them, "Seize her!" So they seized her and set her on a wooden tower and stripped her naked. And behold the magician came forth and placed the wax candle next to her uterus and the candle ignited from it. And so all of them did. Nor was anyone permitted [65] to light from another's candle, rather only from her nakedness. And behold the woman was mortified with a great shame the like of which had not been since the foundation of the city until now.

And it came to pass after some days that lo, the husband of that same woman came and they related to him the entire affair that had occurred to his wife, and he became very angry. What did he do? He gathered all his people and came to her family with the magician and with his family and with his aides and they smote each [70] other with no quarter until there remained nary a one, and the dead who died on account of that woman were 40,035 Romans.

This story is a Hebrew version of the well-known mediaeval short story about Virgil the magician.⁹ It seems that the Hebrew author did not know, however, his identity as the magician Virgil, and so both the woman and the magician are unnamed in the story. It is clear that the Italian word *bonomini* is not the woman's family name -- it only indicates that the woman was from a good family whose members were the *bonomini* -- our author did not know the Hebrew equivalent *azilim* (nobles). Nor did the author know the name of the magician, rather he only knew that the event occurred in ancient Rome, and so it was easiest to insert the story into Titus' period.

The first part of the story, Virgil in the basket, is a self-contained unit -- the woman punished the seducer and made him a mockery. The second part, the punishment of the woman by the magician, is also a self-contained story in which the guilt of the woman is only hinted at. Both stories were fused together not only because they were interesting but also because the woman's shame and the harsh hanging of the lover contain elements which clarify the cruel vengeance of the sorcerer. It is clear then that the two

stories were separate and their hero was not originally identified as the well-known Virgil.¹⁰ There is a book in modern Greek from the eighteenth century in which both parts of our story are joined, except that the hero is not Virgil, but rather the Emperor Leo the Philosopher.¹¹ It is easy to understand how Virgil was identified as the hero: popular belief in the Middle Ages was widespread that Virgil, who prophesied the coming of the Christian messiah and described Hell in the *Aeneid*, possessed supernatural powers; thus the popular view made him a magician. Since the hero in the second part of our short story was a magician, he must have been Virgil.

It is impossible to know the early historical background of our story because allusions to the first or second part alone are no proof that the author did not know the whole story. The first evidence is from the thirteenth century. The troubador Guiraud de Calanson speaks "about the fire that he (Virgil) knew to extinguish." Regarding the entire story about Virgil, there is evidence from the thirteenth century,¹² but we have no way of knowing whether it preceded that date. Jerahmiel lived, as noted, in the eleventh or twelfth century, and Rabbi Elazar ben Asher ha-Levi in the first half of the fourteenth, and it is impossible to determine whether our story is part of the collection of the former or the latter. In any case, the Hebrew version of the story about Virgil the magician is no later than the thirteenth century. This then is one of the earliest -- if not the earliest -- documents which mentions this story and which has been preserved for us.

I have already noted that the Hebrew author did not know the true identity of his hero. From this it is apparent that he did not read the story, rather he heard it from his Italian Christian neighbours. It is possible that they too had already forgotten the name Virgil, but it seems more likely to me that the Hebrew author eliminated the name rather than ascribe any importance to him. It is possible that he did not even know who Virgil was. In any case, the short story was transmitted to the Hebrew author quite accurately without any lacunae. Extant versions of the story differ only slightly from each other and it is apparent that there were yet other versions. It is not possible, however, to know which particulars¹³ our author added.

The comparison of the short Hebrew story with other texts proves its value over other versions. Our story is already noteworthy by its relationship to the classic Italian short story. Only the slaughter at the end is unsuccessful. Perhaps the Hebrew author added it to bring the story's plot to an end.¹⁴ And perhaps the injury that the magician received when he finally fell from the basket did not fit the good taste of the mediaevals.

But the plot is well woven. The opportunity when the magician first saw the woman stemmed from the wedding parade in the street. The Roman woman did not know how to read, and she had to invite a scribe in order to read the letter for her and to write an answer for her. The most important improvement that the Hebrew author introduced was the explanation of the magician's inability to escape from the dilemma through sorcery; because of his great joy, he forgot his magical tricks and books. In the other versions there is no explanation for the sorcerer's lack of powers in the first part of the story and for his superior might in the second part; and as we saw, the reason for this contradiction is that the two stories are united in the tale whereas they were originally separate and only the hero of the second story was a magician. The Hebrew author recognized this contradiction and added an appropriate revenge to cancel it.

In the framework of the contributions to the history of Hebrew literature, it was not my intention to analyze the story of Virgil the magician; this is rather easy to do. I wanted only to present the short story to the reader, to identify the hero, and, with the publication of the unknown Hebrew version of this famous short story, to enrich our knowledge of the story's history. The Hebrew version was not written after the thirteenth century, and therefore it is among the earliest versions of the story known to us. And since its source was in Italy, the Hebrew version is by coincidence the earliest whose source is in Virgil's own homeland.

The story is well told, and written in very good Hebrew. The style is grounded in Biblical Hebrew. But from another perspective, there is no linguistic purity, and the influence of later Hebrew is quite evident. The differing linguistic styles show that the language of the story is consistent and living, and not mechanical. This story has a literary value all its own, and therefore there is value in its publication not only for the history of Hebrew literature, but even for Hebrew literature itself. May contemporary Hebrew readers [and students of mediaeval literature -- tr.] find pleasure in it.

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NOTES

* Translated from the Hebrew version which appeared as "Virgilio 'Mago' in un racconto ebraico medioevale," *Scritti in Memoria di Umberto Nahon*, ed. R. Bonfil et al. (Jerusalem 1978) 168-75. Additional notes by the translator (Steven Bowman) are designated [tr.]

¹ M. Gastor, *Chronicles of Jerahmiel* (London 1899) rpt. with a new introduction by Hayyim Schwartzbaum by Ktav Publishing (New York 1971).

² Cf. J. Perles, "Die Berner Handschrift des Kleinen Arisch," *Jubelschrift Zum 70. Geburtstag des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau 1887) 19-23.

³ A. Neubauer, "Jerahmiel ben Shlomo," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, O.S. 11 (1898) 364, 382, 697-99. See also H. Albeck's note to his Hebrew translation of L. Zunz's *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden. Historisch Entwickelt* entitled *Hadrashot Be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem 1947) 325. Also cf. L. Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie* (Berlin 1889) 485-86.

⁴ Cf. D. Flusser, "The Author of *Sepher Josippon*," *Zion* 18 (1953) 109-26. This history is currently being prepared in an English edition by the present translator [tr.].

⁵ Cf. edition by E.E. Urbach (1939) I, 281; II, 107; IV, 144.

⁶ Italian influence is also evident in the question "How do you stand?" which is a literal translation of the Italian expression "come state?"

⁷ Published by A. Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles* (Oxford 1887) I, 190-91.

⁸ The story of the three Jewish sages, found in *Jerahmiel*, is also in the *Siddur* of Rabbi Shlomo ben Shimshon of Worms (edited by Moses Hershler, Jerusalem, 1971) 127-28. A. Neubauer published the same story which he copied from MS. Oxford 1102, f. 23 in *JQR* 4 (1892) 616; B. Klar republished it in his *Megillath Ahimaz* (Jerusalem 1944) 55-56 (2nd ed. 1974, pp. 45-47), and cf. pp. 128, 174 (2nd ed. pp. 129, 152). On the story cf. L. Zunz *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge* (Frankfort 1892) 388-89 (in the Hebrew edition which H. Albeck annotated, Jerusalem, 1947, pp. 182, 485 f., n. 106); H. Perles in *Monatschrift für Geschichte des Judenthums* (1896) 376; A. Neubauer "Settlements of the Jews in Southern Italy," *JQR* 4 (1892) 616-20. The version which Neubauer reproduces (pp. 619 f.) is almost identical with the story in "Chronicles of Jerahmiel," folio 197b.

⁹ See D. Comparetti, *Virgilio del Medio Evo* (nuova edizione), II (Firenze 1946) 108-20, 151-53. Texts on pp. 180, 188-90, 200-7, 225, 232-36, 247, 249, 260-61. (English tr. by E.F.M. Benecke, *Virgil in the Middle Ages* (New York 1959)).

¹⁰ Comparetti (at n. 9) 111-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 112.

¹² *Ibid.* 113. For a picture of Virgil in the basket, cf. *ibid.* 114-15. It cannot be assumed from this that the second part of the story was not unknown to the artists. Later the vengeance of Virgil is also represented.

¹³ For example, it is interesting that both in the Hebrew version and in the *Weltchronik* of the German poet Jansen Enikel dated ca. 1280 (*ibid.* 200-7) the heroine is an unnamed woman, and when all the fire of Rome was extinguished the Romans were not able to cook and bake (*ibid.* 204), and the Romans said to Virgil that because of the lack of fire "uns stirbet wif und kint" (*ibid.* 205). According to the Hebrew version the magician requested the suffering Romans not to harm him before he offered them his aid. Likewise, according to Enikel, Virgil requested similar assurances (*ibid.* 205). But from another perspective Enikel's version differs from the Hebrew in specific motifs.

¹⁴ Compare the ending of the Book of Esther [tr].