Rhetorical Themes in Intrareligious Hostilities: The Story of William of Norwich and Rabbi Jacob

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Comparing *The Accusation of the Ritual Murder of St. William of Norwich* with the story of *Rashi's Grandson and the Crusaders* sheds a light on the historiographical techniques used by 12th century European Christian and Jewish writers. This type of research presents an exceptional opportunity for comparison, since both accounts were written during approximately the same years; both detail an assault that is related to religious identity; and both were written by religious writers – a monk and a student of Talmud. Though it would be insufficient to make broad claims about Jewish and Christian historiographies of this time period based on just these two accounts, the shared elements within these texts nevertheless reveal meaningful comparisons.

This article will examine these two narratives without assessing their accuracy. Instead, the aim of this paper is to analyze the means which the authors used in order to convey their comprehensive ideas. Both writers used similar literary elements, which examined several themes: the religious motivation of the attackers; biblical and theological ideas; the incompetence of the attackers; the timing of the two attacks; and Jesus's role in these incidents. This article will also explore the two differing authorial styles used to describe their sources of information, and the authors' own roles in the stories. By examining the story-telling techniques in these accounts, modern historians can gain a better understanding of what interested western European audiences in the 12th century, and what the writers thought would draw in their readers' attention. Recordings of attacks on the basis of religion stayed in the collective memory of their

communities, and aroused the readers' sentiments, which in the case of William of Norwich, led to perpetual violence and racism.

The Accusation of the Ritual Murder of St. William of Norwich tells the story of William of Norwich, a twelve-year-old Christian boy who was the victim of a Jewish plot to kill Christian children during the time of Passover in 1144. William was abducted, tortured, and eventually crucified. The account describes how local Jews abused William, and the narrative depicts his torturers as malicious characters. Moreover, this story compared William to Jesus, which then elevated William to the status of a saint.

Meanwhile, in *Rashi's Grandson and the Crusaders*, the writer described an attack on Rabbi Jacob ben Meir in France by second crusaders in the year 1147. Both of these stories were recorded by authors who shared the same religious identity as the heroes in their respective stories. The story of the attack on Rabbi Jacob ben Meir was written by Ephraim Ben Jacob, a Jewish writer who acknowledged the famous Rabbi's authority as a local leader. The narrator of William's story was Thomas of Monmouth, a local Monk from Norwich. Thus, the religious identities of these two writers begs the following questions: who were the intended audiences of these two texts, and why were these two stories written in the first place?

In Rabbi Jacob's case, it seems that the story was meant to inform both the local Jewish community and the whole French Jewish community. This is evident in the writer's acknowledgement of the Jewish community as a whole: "as far as the other communities of France are concerned, we have not heard that a single man was killed or forced into baptism."[1] In the story about William, it is apparent that the author aspired to address a much larger audience of Christians and potential converts. This was clear from his effort to make his chronicle a combination of hagiography and a diatribe, one that included a Christian hero (William), an antihero (the Jews), and a carefully detailed and flamboyant language. This was clear from the writer's effort to frame the murder of William as international: "wherefore the chief men and Rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain assemble together… they cast lots for all the countries which the Jews inhabit…

[1] Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), 345.

and the place whose lot is drawn has to fulfil the duty."[2] By claiming that Jewish communities constantly planned and executed crimes against Christians in various places, Thomas of Monmouth not only warned the people of Norwich but the entire Christian world.

Assessing the intended audiences of these two texts helps to answer the question of what the objective of these two sources might have been. Ephraim Ben Jacob was concerned with his piece reaching other Jewish centers in France. He was interested in informing other Jews of this incident in order to let them know what happened to Rabbi Jacob, an esteemed figure in the Jewish community. Thus, Ephraim Ben Jacob may have taken the opportunity of this incident to elevate Rabbi Jacob's status, to claim that he was saved due to divine intervention. In the case of Monmouth however, the author focused equally on the victim himself as well as on the Jews as a broader threat, to highlight how Jews were deemed an enemy to the Christian community.

In both cases, the writers claim that the unnamed attackers were motivated by their own religions. In the story about William, Monmouth explicitly claimed that murdering a Christian boy was a Jewish practice that took place during Passover – "collecting all the cunning of their crafty plots… and with all haste – for their Passover was coming on in three days".[3] Regarding the assailants of William, there were a number of Jewish men described as chief Rabbis: "the chief of the Jews… suddenly seized hold of the boy…some of them held him behind, others opened his mouth."[4] It is not random that these individuals were mentioned as being leaders in the local Jewish community. This played a role in the alleged importance of Jews killing a Christian boy, a religious duty and privilege that was saved for those of higher status in the community. In the attack of Rabbi Jacob, the attackers were also mentioned as having a religious motivation. This was shown by the second crusaders agreeing not to kill Rabbi Jacob if he converted to Christianity: "perhaps he'll be persuaded so that we can allure

[2] Marc Saperstein and Jacob R. Marcus, Jacob, *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791* (Hebrew Union College Press, 2016), 135.
[3] *William of Norwich*, 136.
[4] Ibid., 137.

him to our faith."[5] In both cases, theological incentives were given to the attackers by the writers.

In both stories, the writers claimed that the attacks were aimed both *personally* against their victims and *collectively* against the entire religion. In the story of Rabbi Jacob, the writer explained that the victim was attacked due to his role as a prominent Rabbi by quoting his attackers: "you [Rabbi Jacob] are the greatest man in Israel; therefore we are taking vengeance on you because of him who was hanged."[6] This quote shows that Rabbi Jacob was attacked because he symbolized the entire Jewish community.

Moreover, Ephraim Ben Jacob claimed that the aggressors tore apart the Torah, that they "tore up the scroll of law in his presence."[7] In addition, the writer claimed that despite the Jewish community not having suffered similar instances as that of Rabbi Jacob, they had been punished as a community. They were required to forgo Christian debt due to the Second Crusade – "they [the Jewish community in France] did lose much of their wealth, for the king of France had issued an order that one who volunteered to go on the Crusade to Jerusalem would be forgiven of the debts he owed the Jews."[8] Ephraim Ben Jacob tied the attack of his Rabbi to Jewish related legislation, suggesting a causality between the treatment of Jews by the French monarchy and this individual incident. Similar to the story of Rabbi Jacob, William of Norwich's murder also symbolized an attack against Christianity. This was apparent from many instances, especially in the language which Monmouth used to describe the killing of William: "while these enemies of the Christian name were rioting in the spirit of malignity around the boy… adjudged him to be fixed to a cross in mockery of the Lord's passion."[9]

The aggressors in both accounts were presented by the writers as incompetent. After the Jews of Norwich decided to murder William, Monmouth wrote that they could not find him, "and the victim, which they had thought they had already secured, had slipped out of their wicked hands."[10] This description was meant to present the Jews as

[5] *Rashi's Grandson*, 345.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] *William of Norwich*, 137-138.
[10] Ibid., 136.

disorderly and wicked, for they were unable to execute their own plan, which included a relatively simple task. Like Monmouth, Ephraim Ben Jacob also portrayed the attackers of Rabbi Jacob as inept and gullible. The attackers were swayed by a high official not to kill Rabbi Jacob. The high official promised that he could convince Rabbi Jacob to convert to Christianity, and if he failed to do so, to then turn him in: "if he [Rabbi Jacob] does not consent… I'll return him over to you tomorrow."[11] Here, the writer presented the reason why the second crusaders did not kill Rabbi Jacob, highlighting how simple it was to prevent them from completing their original plot.

In both of these accounts, Jesus also played a crucial role. In the case of William, the crime that was committed against him was a complete reenactment of the death of Jesus. This was evident by the comparison of William to Jesus throughout the entire narrative. William was said to have left his original hometown to the city of Norwich, much like how Jesus went to Jerusalem later in his life – "he betook himself [William] to the city."[12] After moving to the city, William, like Jesus, was in contact with Jewish individuals: "the Jews who were settled there... preferred him before all skinners."[13] Moreover, a reference to Judas also arose in the text when Monmouth wrote about a person who was a conspirator with the "Jews," helping them to perform their scheme: "they found – I am not sure whether he was a Christian or a Jew – a man who is a most treacherous fellow and just the fitting person for carrying out their execrable crime."[14] It is notable that Monmouth validated the cunningness of this conspirator not only by comparing him to Judas, but also by hinting at his fluid religious identity.

Furthermore, there are parallels in the text between Jesus and William regarding their deaths by murder.[15] In the case of Rabbi Jacob, the attackers were second crusaders who sought to avenge Jesus – "we are taking vengeance on you because of him who was hanged."[16] The attackers decided to punish Rabbi Jacob by inflicting on

[11] *Rashi's Grandson*, 345.
[12] *William of Norwich*, 137.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 137-139.
[16] *Rashi's Grandson*, 344.

him the same pain that Jesus had experienced during his crucifixion: “we are going to wound you [Rabbi Jacob] just as you Jews inflicted five wounds on our God.”[17]

Thus, the two narratives are full of biblical and theological themes. William, who was compared to Jesus throughout the piece, exemplified other Christian themes. An ideal that arose in his story was that of sainthood, a status to which William was elevated to just after his murder. As Monmouth claimed, a Jew from Cambridge - who was aware of the plot to kill William - converted to Christianity due to his belief in William’s divine significance: “as I became acquainted with the glorious display of miracles which the divine power carried out through the merits of the blessed martyr William… I forsook Judaism.”[18] Furthermore, Monmouth presented William as someone who was intended to be killed, as chosen by God for martyrdom: “by the ordering of divine providence he had been predestined to martyrdom from the beginning of time.”[19]

Later, William’s pain and torture was described scrupulously: “some of them held him behind, others opened his mouth and introduced an instrument of torture which is called a teazle, and, fixing it by straps through both jaws to the back of his neck, they fastened it with a knot as tightly as it could be drawn.”[20] This type of description glorified the pain which William endured, highlighting the Christian appreciation of the suffering of a martyr. In the story of Rabbi Jacob, there was an apparent Hebrew Biblical theme. As Ephraim Ben Jacob wrote, before almost being killed by his attackers, Rabbi Jacob was saved by a non-Jew local official. “His [Rabbi Jacob] pure soul would have left him had it not been for the kindness of our Creator who brought mercy… and brought it about that a high official be on the road.”[21] This marked the biblical theme of God working through non-Jewish agents in order to steer the life of his chosen people. This was an effort by the writer to present Rabbi Jacob’s experience and survival as a Godly intervention to prove Rabbi Jacob’s significance whilst simultaneously presenting Judaism as the true religion.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] *William of Norwich*, 137.
[19] Ibid., 136.
[20] Ibid., 137.
[21] *Rashi’s Grandson*, 344.

However, the two writers did not share the same methods for corroborating their stories. This can be seen in the use or disuse of witnesses as sources of authentication in both stories. In his short account, Ephraim Ben Jacob did not describe who informed him of the Rabbi's arduous experience. It might be obvious that the victim of this event was its principal witness. Nevertheless, the author seemed uninterested in going into the details on this topic. He hardly mentioned the high official who saved Rabbi Jacob, and he did not acknowledge the identities of his attackers.

The absence of witnesses in Ephraim Ben Jacob's writing is juxtaposed with Monmouth's style of writing that informed his reader about the identity of his witnesses. In his piece, Monmouth was constantly informing his reader about the witnesses he relied upon for the narrative. Monmouth's witnesses were former Jews who converted to Christianity: "I [Monmouth] have learnt from certain Jews, who were afterwards converted to the Christian faith."[22] The unnamed sources Monmouth mentioned in this quote were narrowed down, and Monmouth then focused on one main Jewish witness for the rest of his story: "as a proof of the truth and credibility of the matter we now adduce something which we have heard from the lips of Theobald, who was once a Jew, and afterwards a monk."[23] Here, Monmouth stated the name of this witness, which supports his existence.

Furthermore, Monmouth informed his readers that his main witness had not only turned into a Christian, but also became a monk. Referring to a pious and religious individual who converted may have added more credibility to his source. It is likely that Monmouth described this main witness as being a monk because of the man's monastic and secluded lifestyle. For what might be a fabricated story, a witness who could not be questioned or found would be deemed the perfect source. In order to have reinforced the details of William's murder, Monmouth explained to his readers why his witness was extremely credible: "these words – observe, the words of a converted Jew – we reckon to be all truer, in that we received them as uttered by one who was a converted enemy, and also had been privy to the secrets of our enemies."[24]

[22] *William of Norwich*, 136.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

The two authors also involved themselves in their own stories in different ways. In the account of Ephraim Ben Jacob, it seems that the author was informing the Jewish communities about what happened to Rabbi Jacob. Ephraim identified himself as a student of Rabbi Jacob, saying that "the French crusaders got together at Rameru, and entered the house of our teacher Jacob."[25] However, it is possible that the author called himself Rabbi Jacob's student as a gesture of respect, rather than to indicate that he was literally a student of his. This was also likely a way for him to highlight Rabbi Jacob's importance. Ephraim Ben Jacob framed his story in the context of the rest of the Jewish community, and presented himself as someone who was aware of the life of other Jewish people. This is evident in his explanation about a decree related to the French Jewish community: "since most loans of the French Jews were given on trust, without surety, they lost their money."[26] In Monmouth's piece, it is evident that Monmouth did not know the hero of his own story, for he did not specify any personal connection to him.

Nevertheless, Monmouth showed that he was more than just the narrator of William's story. Monmouth described the aftermath of the investigation of William's murder and displayed himself as extremely informed in the details of the case. He named individuals, relevant locations, and other details of the case "by a certain Wulward with whom he lodged."[27] He also described himself as having an active role in the examination of the murder scene: "we [unclear who], after enquiring into the matter very diligently, did both find the house, and discovered some most certain marks in it of what had been done there."[28] Monmouth paraded himself not only as an eye-witness, but as a detective-like figure in his story, placing himself in a team ("we"). It might be that he added this detail to further strengthen the genuineness of his story, to demonstrate that his account had been thoroughly checked and verified.

It is noteworthy that both alleged attacks took place during the Jewish holidays of Passover and Shavuot. What is special about these two holidays is that each of them has a Christian equivalent – Pentecost and Easter. Rabbi Jacob was assaulted during

[25] *Rashi's Grandson*, 344.
[26] Ibid., 345.
[27] *William of Norwich*, 136.
[28] Ibid., 138.

Shavuot, "on the second day of the Feast of Weeks."[29] This fact appeared in the beginning of his report, but did not seem important for the writer other than that it merely placed the incident in time. Nonetheless, if this attack did take place, the second crusaders may have timed it during Pentecost.

As for the story about William, the preparations for the murder took place during the holy days prior to Easter: "at the begging of Lent, they had made the choice of the boy William" and "on the Monday after Palm Sunday, the detestable messenger of the Jews set out to execute the business."[30] Though the preparation for the murder took place during the Christian holy days, the actual murder took place during Passover: "on the next day, which is Passover for them… the chief of the Jews… Suddenly seized hold of the boy William."[31] In his account, Monmouth presented Passover as a holiday that included gory and violent traditions, and that Jewish customs were dreadful. It was not therefore surprising to him that this most hideous crime of murdering William took place on Passover. Thus, Monmouth brought to the table a theological claim that God had predestined William to be a martyr and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, but it was the Jews' wickedness that was ultimately responsible for the crime.

While one story can be understood as a report of an incident, the other shows all the signs of amplifying an alleged incident into a universal pattern, alarming its readers of a threat to their existence. Despite the accounts being different in their language and specifically in their description of violence, they do share many narratorial similarities. The two accounts underscore that hostility between Christian and Jewish communities piqued the interest of readers far beyond the fate of their story's victims. For the medieval reader, the victims in these texts likely reflected how they were perceived by their religious neighbors. For the modern reader, these texts reveal the writers' stereotyping; what they assumed was important for their readers; and how they perceived their own roles within their respective communities.

[29] *Rashi's Grandson*, 344.
[30] *William of Norwich*, 136-137.
[31] Ibid.

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