

# CHAUCER'S 'NEW RACHEL' AND THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF MEDIEVAL ANTI- SEMITISM

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When I began researching the *Prioress's Tale*, I hoped to establish a more persuasive basis for the opinion, long held by some scholars, that this story is an exercise in dramatic irony in which the narrator's anti-Semitism is being exposed to ridicule. Having now spent many months at work on the matter, I would still prefer concurring with that opinion but have come, for reasons that require rather laborious recounting, to think the whole matter much less susceptible of any convincing proof than I had once imagined.

Nearly everyone acknowledges that Chaucer is satirizing the Prioress's sentimentality and provinciality in the *General Prologue*, with his sly remarks about her extraordinary sensitivity to animals and her school French.<sup>1</sup> I believed when I started, and still would like to believe, that he highlights the same limitations in the *Tale* by allowing her, as narrator, to stumble into some shocking juxtapositions of tender solicitude with graphic cruelty and naively cold-hearted racial hatred.<sup>2</sup> In the past, some have rejected such contentions on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence in the *Tale* to justify any claims that it was carefully tailored to the Prioress.<sup>3</sup> Others have been sceptical of Chaucer's satiric intent

<sup>1</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and medieval estates satire* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1973), 132–3, notes that the satiric tradition associates sentimentality toward animals with 'indifference to human suffering'. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), speaks for many in observing that Chaucer's evaluation of the Prioress's French 'has perhaps a touch of slyness in it, in the hint of patrician condescension to those who know only the "provincial" Anglo-Norman now spoken among the genteel classes' (69).

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth was the first to point to this collision of bigotry and sympathy as a major source of the poem's affective power (see *The Prioress's Tale: a variorum edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2, part 20, ed. Beverly Boyd (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 29). Most recently, the tale's equipoise of sentiment and cruelty has been analysed by Helen Cooper, *The structure of The Canterbury Tales* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 163–8. The strongest claims for an ironic reading of this feature are those of Schoeck, Gaylord, Donaldson, I. Robinson and Howard (see Boyd, 44–9, for a summary of their arguments).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., William W. Lawrence, *Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 61, and Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1951), 218–19.

because of their familiarity with the dreary record of injustices repeatedly perpetrated against Jews in virtually every European country during the later Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> These barbarities were sometimes sponsored, often merely tolerated, by secular and ecclesiastical authorities, so – goes the argument – what reason do we have for believing Chaucer any more enlightened in this regard than many of his educated contemporaries?

Inexorable as this rhetorical question may sound when appended to a factual recital of medieval intolerance, I think we need not concede the implied answer. For the Geoffrey Chaucer revealed in the records of his public career as well as in his poetry was a widely travelled man of extraordinary subtlety and sophistication,<sup>5</sup> a man attuned to ironic anomalies in the human condition and prone to express the joy of their discovery in self-mockery as well as in the mockery of others. That such a person could have recognized the fundamental incongruity of *Christian* anti-Semitism (an attitude repeatedly condemned by various papal proclamations),<sup>6</sup> and could have come to regard this bigoted outlook as worthy of ridicule seems to require no defence, especially in light of Chaucer's unquestioned satire of many other political, social, and religious clichés of his world.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly, one difficulty with proposing an ironic reading of the *Prioress's Tale* is the lack of a clear literary precedent addressing the same theme. Chaucer's approach to poetic composition often betrays an almost neoclassical dependence on models, and no vernacular or Latin prototype for this kind of sophisticated mockery of Jew-baiting readily suggests itself. Similarly, an author with Chaucer's social aspirations, conservative temperament, and deft sense of diplomacy might be thought especially unlikely to adopt, toward a favourite contemporary prejudice, such a confrontational posture (a posture much riskier to the social critic than mere moralizing).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the claims of Brewer, Owen and Ridley summarized in Boyd, 36, 42–4.

<sup>5</sup> Philip S. Alexander, 'Madam Eglentyne, Geoffrey Chaucer and the problem of medieval anti-Semitism', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 74 (1992), 109–20, thinks that 'a realistic topographical detail at lines 493–4 suggests that he [Chaucer] was directly acquainted with Jewish ghettos' (118).

<sup>6</sup> Solomon Grayzel, 'The papal bull *Sicut Judeis*', repr. in *Essential papers on Judaism and Christianity in conflict*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 231–59, documents the repeated ecclesiastical condemnations of the various anti-Semitic 'blood libels,' the complete failure of the Church to enforce these decrees effectively, and the theological schizophrenia whereby protected Jews are defined so narrowly (i.e. 'only those who do not presume to plot against the Christian faith') as to deny a presumption of innocence to most.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Chaucer's poetry*, ed. E. Talbot Donaldson, 2nd edn (New York: Ronald, 1975), 933–4.

My own view is that the first of these objections seriously underestimates the degree to which Chaucer recreates his sources and redirects them to new purposes; as for the second, it may easily be turned on its proponents since social caution on Chaucer's part may well account for the extraordinary subtlety of the satire (and our resultant doubts about its actual presence). Thus, it remains true that a satiric response to this tragic blind spot in medieval Christian civilization would have been at least theoretically available to Chaucer. Moreover, to assume this sort of satiric purpose for the *Prioress's Tale* in no way risks positing an anachronistically liberal Chaucer, for he does, after all, treat his fictional Jews as mere props and, on this reading, appears to find his narrator's anti-Semitism gruesomely humorous rather than heinous.<sup>8</sup> In our world, only a Jewish author would be allowed this luxury. Political correctness would now restrict non-Jewish authors to treating this theme within a tragic, or moralistic, or elegiac framework.

As for the claim that the *Tale* is given to the Prioress merely because its genre broadly suits her vocation, and that it has no specific correlation with her character as delineated in the *General Prologue*, so impartial a scholar as Boyd has noted that this view 'hardly matches the carryover of sentimentality and liturgical bent that are stressed in the portrait and carefully woven into *Prologue* and *Tale*'.<sup>9</sup> It was not my original purpose, however, to reiterate the acute and fairly convincing observations of Donaldson, Gaylord and others concerning the various lexical and structural evidences of satiric intent in the story of the 'litel clergeon'. The overuse of sentimental diminutives in the narrator's description of the 'clergeon' and his world, the categorical attribution of Satanic inspiration to the Jews, and the brutally vulgar incongruities of narrative order and tone all tell their own story,<sup>10</sup> as do the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alan Gaylord's description of Chaucer's comically detached perspective on anti-Semitism: 'The important thing about the Jews is what the Prioress thinks about them' ('The unconquered tale of the Prioress', *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, 67(1962), 630).

<sup>9</sup> *The Prioress's Tale: a variorum edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2, part 20, 41.

<sup>10</sup> We are jerked away from a delicate stanza depicting the grieving mother at the foot of the child's bier (l.627), confronted with a following stanza in which the Jews (all assumed to be guilty) are vividly tortured and executed (ll.633-4), and then jostled back into a third stanza (ll.635-41), where we are once more invited to gaze on the pathetic but grotesque spectacle of the dead child singing *Alma redemptoris*. This stunning tonal and structural incoherence is anticipated, however, in a shorter passage describing the provost's arrival at the scene of the crime / miracle: 'He cam anon withouten tariyng, / And herieth Crist that is of heuene kyng, / And eek his moder, honour of mankynde, / And after that the Jewes leet he bynde' (ll.617-20). Cf. Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English tradition* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1972), 151: 'pious tenderness about the martyr comes into surprising adjacence to the rancour and injustice toward the Jews'

apparently parodic echoes of the *Tale's* motifs and key phrases in the mouth of the Nun's Priest.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, my plan was to argue that these evidences of satiric intent are governed by a hitherto unremarked central conceit: 'this newe Rachel.' This phrase, used to describe the clergeon's grief-stricken mother, alludes to Matthew 2:16–18, where the Slaughter of the Innocents is recounted. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, then, in its New Testament context, this reference to Rachel evokes the lament of *Jewish* mothers over a massacre of *Jewish* babies by a maniacal *Gentile* ruler.<sup>12</sup> Chaucer appears to invite our recollection of this embarrassing anomaly by allowing the Prioress, in her declamation against the Jews, to identify Herod, erroneously, as their leader and co-religionist rather than as an insecure Roman stooge who was their oppressor: 'O cursed folk of Herodes al newe' (l. 574). But the allusion has more to it than this. 'Rachel bewailing her children' is cited by the author of Matthew as the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. That prophecy, Jeremiah 31:15, is part of a long passage: (chs 30–31) predicting Israel's ultimate repentance and deliverance from Gentile enemies. Those Gentile enemies, it is promised, will in their turn be devoured and reduced to captivity (30:16).

Here, then, I believed I had found a biblical allusion whose context comically explodes the Prioress's provincially devout intolerance. The Prioress prefaces her hate-filled tale with a prayer to the Queen of Heaven – a Jewish widow whose beloved Son, an itinerant rabbi, was crucified by Gentile soldiers on the orders of a Roman governor. But in the *Tale* itself everything is backwards: a group of Jews, both the guilty and the mere bystanders (accessories after the fact), has been summarily tortured to death to atone for the murder of a Gentile child and to placate the grief of his Gentile mother, who is then described as 'this newe Rachel'. Seen in the light of its Old and New Testament sources, this allusion inevitably turns the Prioress's racially constituted universe topsy-turvy and makes hash of her anti-Semitism.

<sup>11</sup> The idea that the Priest is retaliating against the Prioress is traced by Derek Pearsall, quite sceptically, to Kate Petersen and thence to R.F. Patterson and F.W. Robinson (see *The Nun's Priests's Tale: a variorum edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2, part 9 (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 32–3); for detailed explications, cf. Arthur T. Broes, 'Chaucer's disgruntled cleric: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*', *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 156–62; Wayne D. McGinnis, 'The dramatic fitness of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*', *CEA*, 37 (1975), 24–6; and Sherman Hawkins, 'Chaucer's Prioress and the sacrifice of praise', *JEGP*, 63 (1964), 599–624.

<sup>12</sup> The New Testament itself does not assert, but takes for granted, Herod's Gentile origins. The ultimate source for our knowledge of Herod's Idumean roots appears to be Josephus (lib. 14., *Ant.* c. 18), but the basic facts are a commonplace in medieval biblical commentaries. See Aquinas's *Catena aurea* on Matthew 2:1–2, where the comments of Rabanus and Chrysostom on Herod's circumstances and motives are summarized.

In the Gospel narrative, villainy is more or less impartially divided among the Jews howling for Christ's execution and the Gentiles who carry it out. Likewise, in the *Prioress's Tale*, the Gentile representative of legality, the provost, seems fully as brutal and arbitrary as the Jewish conspirators responsible for the clergeon's murder. The point, therefore, of the inverted plot parallelism would seem to be that injustice is a perennially human trait and not one limited to a particular racial or cultural tradition, as the Prioress imagines. So in a certain sense the irony of her scriptural reference to 'this newe Rachel' is intrinsic and its presence indisputable. But is it intentional on Chaucer's part? The only candid answer I can offer at this stage is that it well might be, but then again it might not.

Whatever aberrations one may detect in the actual interpretive practices of fourteenth-century biblical commentators (and they are manifold), contemporary hermeneutical canons insisted on the importance of approaching texts, both sacred and secular, by first apprehending their literal meaning.<sup>13</sup> Concerning the Old Testament, Beryl Smalley long ago traced for us some of the major strides made from the time of Andrew of St Victor (mid-twelfth century) toward recovering the original Hebrew context, both religious and social, of the Law and the Prophets.<sup>14</sup> That sporadic process of recovery consisted not only in acquiring new factual knowledge about ancient Jewish customs and beliefs from near-contemporary Jewish exegetes such as Rashi,<sup>15</sup> but also in unlearning allegorical habits of reading that had veiled the literal meaning of many parts of these books from the eyes of Christian readers for more than a millennium. An educated layman of Chaucer's generation, with his humanistic bent, mildly anticlerical sentiments, and access (however indirect) to current rabbinical scholarship, would have been even more prone than a churchman to approach these texts unmediated by old-fashioned helps that obscured or obliterated their original purposes and contexts.<sup>16</sup> Hence he would have been as well positioned as anyone in his world to notice and relish the irony of labelling a Gentile woman 'this newe Rachel'.

<sup>13</sup> By Chaucer's time, the 'literal' meaning was usually understood to include not merely a correct lexical identification and grammatical parsing of isolated words and phrases but a proper assessment of the author's figurative language and general intentions.

<sup>14</sup> *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1952; rpt. Notre Dame, Ind.: U of Notre Dame P, 1964). Cf. G.R. Evans, who emphasizes that 'the study of Hebrew did not become usual as a direct result of these pioneering efforts' and that there was 'no steady line of development . . .'. *The language and logic of the Bible: the road to Reformation* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1985), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian scholars*, ([Pittsburgh]: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> Even Langland, whose knowledge of commentary traditions is well documented, often works from a direct, contextual reading of scriptural passages, responding in ways that are highly idiosyncratic and quasi-New Critical.

Unfortunately, however, Chaucer's being so well-placed to notice this incongruity offers no guarantee that he did. If the anti-Semitism of the *Prioress's Tale* is simply generic (a common motif in *Miracles of the Virgin*)<sup>17</sup> and the *Tale* itself merely a bowl of pious pablum vaguely suitable to a well-meaning but shallow nun, Chaucer may have been an unwitting victim of this ironic phrase rather than its deliberate perpetrator. He would, after all, have been familiar with references to Rachel bewailing her children in several distinctly non-ironic contexts. For example, in the Mass of the Holy Innocents, where two allusions to Rachel's grief occur, the references have been comfortably assimilated to the explicitly Christian martyrdom of the 144,000 virgins delineated in the accompanying text from Apocalypse 14. Similar accommodations occur in the liturgy and homilies of the Office.<sup>18</sup> Chaucer shows his awareness of this eschatological context in the stanza where the Prioress predicts the young martyr's entry into the procession of virginal followers of the Lamb (ll. 579–85).

Likewise, nearly all of the learned exegesis available to Chaucer on the Old Testament source of this 'Rachel' text asserts a specifically Christian framework for it and denies, or deflects, the uniquely Jewish circumstances of Jeremiah's promises. In fact, an undercurrent of theological chauvinism characterizes patristic and medieval explications of many Old Testament prophecies, a result of the widespread perception that the New Testament's own legitimacy depended on subordinating these earlier texts to a Christological reading.<sup>19</sup> Thus Bede, in a passage cited in the third nocturn for Holy Innocents, sees no hermeneutical or historical injustice in asserting that the real agent of Rachel's weeping is the Church, 'bewailing the unjust death of her members'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert Frank, 'Miracles of the Virgin, medieval anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*', *The wisdom of poetry: essays in early English literature in honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, eds Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Pubs, 1982), 178–88, 290–7.

<sup>18</sup> The same use is made of Apocalypse 14, and an accompanying homily by Chrysostom repeatedly asserts a conscious Christian purpose on the part of the Holy Innocents: e.g. *Norunt laudare Christum, qui loqui non noverant*: 'they know to praise Christ who had not known how to speak'. *Breviarium ad usum insignis ecclesiae Sarum*, 3 vols, ed. F. Procter and C. Wordsworth (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1879–86), I, ccxxxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Reuther, *Faith and fratricide, the theological roots of anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), traces all later manifestations of Christian anti-Judaism (and hence anti-Semitism) to the fear of the earliest Christian community that its own legitimacy would be undermined if literal or historical (i.e. non-typological) readings of the Old Testament were permitted: 'The polemic against "the Jews" in Paul, as in the New Testament generally, is a rejection of *Judaism*, i.e. "the Jews" as a religious community. Judaism for Paul is not only *not* an ongoing covenant of salvation where men continue to be related in true worship of God: it *never* was such a community of faith and grace . . .'. As a consequence of this Pauline attitude, 'The prophetic dialectic of judgment and promise is presumed to apply, not to one people, the Jews, but to two peoples, the Jews and the future Church. This means that all the statements of divine wrath . . . are read monolithically as descriptive of "the Jews". The positive side of the prophetic message . . . [is] said to apply not to the Jews, but to the future Church' (105; 131).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ccxl.

Equally typical, in his insistence on an exclusively Christian significance for these passages, is the influential thirteenth-century commentator, Hugh of St Cher. This insistence extends to such small but awkward matters as the 'Gentile enemies' of Israel (mentioned in Jeremiah 30:16: '*qui comedunt te devorabuntur*'); in Hugh's skillfully allegorical hands, these Gentile enemies are transformed into Catholic prelates, 'who nowadays devour Jacob . . .'.<sup>21</sup> *Such a reading would be unthinkable without the fundamental enabling assumption that the Church has become the true Jacob (that is to say Israel) and inherited the promises.*<sup>22</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that Hugh agrees with Bede: Jacob's wife Rachel also signifies the Church!<sup>23</sup> When he comes to Jeremiah's predictions of a permanent spiritual renewal for Israel, Hugh notes that the Jews believe some of these promises of restoration to have been achieved at the time of the return from Babylon and that the rest will be fulfilled under the aegis of their expected Messiah. But then he cites with approval St Jerome's mouldy assessment: 'all that is said here concerning the punishment of the wicked [who are, curiously, all assumed to be Jews] has already been fulfilled by the Romans or will be completed in Hell. However, the prosperity which is promised here refers to the conversion of those Jews who repented on account of the Apostles' preaching, and the entire passage is to be referred . . . to the founding of the Church'.<sup>24</sup>

None of this thinking had changed in Chaucer's day. Nicholas of Lyra, for example, insists that all the details in Jeremiah 30 prophesying the Jews' deliverance from Babylonian captivity are mere figures of speech and that the reality behind them is Christ, whose work of universal salvation is depicted 'in this chapter and the next'.<sup>25</sup> Nicholas explicitly rejects the possibility of any future

<sup>21</sup> *Opera omnia in Universam Sanctam Scripturam* (1669) 4: fo. 245rb.

<sup>22</sup> On the early development of this basic hermeneutic device for baptizing the Old Testament, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The emergence of the Catholic tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1971), 11–27, vol. 1 of *The Christian tradition: a history of the development of doctrine*.

<sup>23</sup> 4: fo. 247vb. He approaches the question etymologically, informing us that her name signifies 'sheep' and that this is appropriate since 'the Church is the hundredth sheep whom the shepherd, having found, carries back to the sheepfold on his own shoulders'.

<sup>24</sup> 4: fo. 246ra.

<sup>25</sup> *Biblia sacra cum glossis, interlineari et ordinaria, et moralitatibus Nicolai Lyrani* (Venice, 1588), 4: fo. 150 vb. Cf. fo. 151ra: *Istud non potest intelligi de reditione captiuitatis Babylonice, nec de aliqua alia sequenti saluatione temporali, quia secundum doctores Hebreorum, & secundum veritatem, populus Israel prout diuiditur contra populum Iuda, sicut est hic, non est reuersus de captiuitate, nec a Iudeis expectatur vsque ad tempus Messiae. Et ideo secundum nos, qui confitemur eius aduentum praeterisse, oportet quos litera ista aliter intelligatur.* 'This cannot be understood concerning the return from Babylonian captivity, nor concerning any other later temporal deliverance, for according to the doctors of the Hebrews, and according to truth, the people of Israel (insofar as they were divided from the people of Judah, as is the case here) did not return from captivity, nor is this expected by the Jews until the time of the Messiah. And therefore, according to us, who confess his [i.e. the Messiah's] advent to have happened already, it is necessary that these writings be understood differently'.

Jewish material blessings when he quarrels with Rashi's claim that Jeremiah 31:4 (*'Rursumque aedificabo te'*) supports a belief in a literally rebuilt Jerusalem 'where Messiah will reign temporally and where all of the Gentiles will be subjugated to the rule of the Jews'. Nicholas finds this view patently false since the prophecy has already been fulfilled by Christ's founding of the Church, 'which is called Jerusalem'.<sup>26</sup>

The most widely read fifteenth-century commentator, Denis the Carthusian, repeats, and amplifies, the points made by Hugh and Nicholas about the exclusively Christian significance of these irenic prophecies. Indeed, citing Jerome, he insists that references to 'Israel' in Jeremiah 31 apply solely to 'spiritual Israel' since 'the carnal and impious Jews are not worthy of the name of Israel'.<sup>27</sup> As late as the seventeenth century, Catholic commentators such as Cornelius à Lapide, whose work is little more than a compendium of medieval interpretations, take a similar tack. When he comes to Jeremiah 31:15, Cornelius offers a repulsively anti-Semitic interpretation that drips with an irony invisible to him. He begins by asserting that the 'Rachel weeping' verse applies literally, and solely, to the Slaughter of the Innocents; but then he proceeds to suggest that, by extension, this commemoration of infant martyrdom can also be said to apply to '*Christian children who, on account of hatred toward Christ, are killed by Jews and infidels*'. There follows a series of historical anecdotes, including two wherein Jews are said to have been responsible for murdering Christian children<sup>28</sup> – the very same inverted (if not to say 'twisted') context invoked for Rachel's lament in *The Prioress's Tale*.

Even Thomas Aquinas's commentary on Jeremiah, a progressive one devoted to analyzing literal meanings, still manages to drain these prophecies of any future Jewish blessings by applying an interpretive strategy that simultaneously historicizes and typologizes them. Thus Aquinas asserts that the original reference of these prophecies was to the restoration of the Jews from captivity in Babylon during the time of Zorobabel and their later escape from

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., fo. 152ra–b. As for how a Christian leader is to interpret the broader issues, Nicholas mentions Hugh's opinion that Jeremiah's predicted blessings have already been completed in the preaching of the Apostles, but he himself prefers to think that an ultimate fulfillment will occur at the Second Coming when all Jews then still alive will be converted. Hence he concedes at the opening of his exegesis on the first verse of Jeremiah 31 that 'all of these things are true, whether one understands "Israel" according to the flesh (for then [i.e., at the Second Coming] all the Jews will be converted to Christ) or according to the spirit, that is, as all the faithful, who are called by the name Israel. Isaiah. 54.f.' (fo. 151vb).

<sup>27</sup> *Enarrationes in Jeremiam prophetam*, art. xlvi. In *Doctoris ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani opera omnia* (Montreuil & Tournai, 1896–1912), 9:217.

<sup>28</sup> *Commentarii in scripturam sacram* (Lyons, 1854), 6:811a–b. I have not found these anecdotal applications in any medieval commentary on Jeremiah, but they are unlikely to have originated with Cornelius.



foreign oppression under Simon Maccabeus. However, in the same discussion he repeatedly insists that ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah's promises is to be found in the Christian believer's liberation from demonic forces and in the massive conversion of Jews to Christian faith predicted by Paul for the End of the World.<sup>29</sup>

How, therefore, can we choose intelligently between the two major interpretive possibilities for the *Prioress's Tale*? Do we weigh more heavily the external documentary evidence of an almost invincible cultural blindness or the internal evidence of literary criticism, with its suggestions of deliberate irony and mockery? Either Chaucer carelessly deploys 'this newe Rachel' as a vaguely appropriate encomium for a bereaved mother – one sanctioned by well-known liturgical models – or he cunningly invokes the same phrase to function as a central conceit in a web of fairly sophisticated satiric cues that ensnare his narrator. Since we have seen that anti-Judaism in medieval biblical commentaries was not only quite extensive but programmatic, unapologetic, often unaware of itself, and quite prone to being vented in contexts like the one in question, the empirical bias of my own training makes me lean toward the first of these explanations as the more likely. If so, then Chaucer himself, no less than the fictional Jews, is here the target of a sad situational irony that succeeding centuries have brought into progressively sharper focus.

On the other hand, as I noted in my opening, most of our reading experience of Chaucer suggests a very guarded authorial presence, superficially gregarious but compassionate and remarkably self-critical; a person far less likely to embarrass himself over such a blatant cultural blind spot than, say, Shakespeare or Milton. And it isn't as though Chaucer lived in a world that had never heard anti-Semitism condemned as unworthy of Christian faith.<sup>30</sup> When we combine this general sense of Chaucer with the

<sup>29</sup> *Opera omnia*, eds S.E. Fretté and P. Maré (Paris, 1874–99), 19:166–74. An exegetical moderate, Aquinas foists no specifically Christian gloss on the 'Rachel' verse itself, contenting himself with a series of philological and historical notes: *Figurative loquitur, secundum quod dicitur hyperbolice, in parentes mortuos tristitiam redundare de filiorum adversitate. Vel quia in Romana captivitate juxta sepulcrum Rachelis Judaei captivi ducti sunt, et venditi. Vel quia figurative dicitur plorare pueros juxta se occisos, cum ipsa juxta Bethleem sepulta sit . . .*: 'This is spoken figuratively, as in hyperbole it is said that dead parents experience sadness over the adversity of their children. Or, since Jewish prisoners during the Roman captivity were led to the tomb of Rachel and sold. Or she is said figuratively to weep over the children killed near her because she herself [i.e. Rachel] was buried near Bethlehem' (172).

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the oft-mentioned Papal bulls that repudiate harassment of the Jews as unworthy of Christian faith, a relevant factor in softening anti-Semitic attitudes was the common pulpit cliché of the 'virtuous Jews and pagans.' The thrust of this cliché is that Christians should be ashamed of their failure to measure up to the charity, fidelity and bravery often demonstrated by the Jews and Muslim infidels. Both Thomas Brunton and John Bromyard invoke the idea (see Richard Rex, 'Chaucer and the Jews', *MLQ*, 45 (1984), 115). Cf. *Piers Plowman* B IX, l. 82.

impression of striking coherence offered by the aforementioned passages in both the *Prioress's Tale* and the *General Prologue*, our literary intuition may once again tilt us toward the more generous conclusion.

The real problem I would have with that 'more generous' judgement of Chaucer is that, if 'this newe Rachel' were the central link in a chain of references that mock contemporary anti-Semitism, it would also be, by implication, one of the most daring attacks ever launched, before early modern times, on a key citadel of patristic hermeneutics. I am referring to the claim that Christianity has inherited and co-opted the Covenant, that the Church is the new Israel (or Rachel, for that matter), and that all of the Old Testament can properly be interpreted only in light of this axiom. Insofar as medieval anti-Semitism affects the literate class, and reflects more than a random collection of vulgar and visceral racial hostilities, it has its tap root in the soil of this axiom.<sup>31</sup> Modern biblical criticism may be said to begin when the more belligerent ramifications of this position were gradually abandoned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If we credit Chaucer with a satirical purpose in this instance, we must give him credit for having put his axe to the root of the whole exegetical tree; and I, for one, am somewhat uneasy with the notion that his Christian humanism was quite so flexible and farsighted. But I am willing to be persuaded.

<sup>31</sup> Heiko Oberman, 'The stubborn Jews: timing the escalation of antisemitism in late medieval Europe', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 34 (1989), XXV, notes that there is not 'just one carrier' for the rising tide of late-medieval anti-Semitism: 'It is not the heretical Joachites in the shadows, nor just the gross preaching-friars nor the uninformed common man (*der gemeine Mann*) who falls victim to the myth of eucharistic desecration or blood libel, but the sophisticated elite, the most refined representatives of high theology and biblical studies. . . . Modern Christian spokesmen for tolerance and the brotherhood of man prefer to believe that it was merely the base elements in Christianity that led to the upsurge of anti-Jewish agitation in the later Middle Ages. On the contrary . . . it is the most spiritual thrust in Christianity, its search for reform and renewal, which makes the Christian tradition precisely in those times of revival [i.e. Lent and Eastertide] a deadly threat to the Jews . . .'.