A Hebrew Elegy on the York Martyrs of 1190

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It is generally known that the Hebrew sources for the history of the Jews in medieval England are extremely sparse. The chronicler Ephraim of Bonn gives a poignant, but not in every respect accurate, account of the massacres of 1189–90: and historians of a later generation reproduce a legendary story of the Expulsion of the Jews by Edward I, partly deriving as it seems from a lost work of the polemist and grammarian Profiat Duran and partly from the Fortalitium Fidei of the Franciscan Alfonso de España. Except for one or two oblique allusions, this is almost all. Any new material that comes to light is therefore all the more valuable.

A century ago, Zunz called attention to two Hebrew elegies on the English massacres at the beginning of the reign of Richard I. One of them, by R. Menachem ben Jacob, was presented (as far as the portion relating to England was concerned) by Solomon Schechter at the very first ordinary meeting of the Jewish Historical Society of England, and occupies pride of place after the Presidential Address in the earliest volume of its Transactions. It is heartrending, turgid, and not particularly informative, being conceived in general terms which might apply to any other medieval massacre. It is all the more surprising that Zunz’s further indication has not hitherto been followed up, as I discovered not long since to my great astonishment. It is true that he gives no exact information as to the source, which he indicates vaguely as “a French Manuscript”; but at the time when Schechter wrote, so soon after the Master’s death, and while Joseph Jacobs was still engaged in collecting every scrap of evidence relating to the Jews of Angevin England, it would not have been difficult to trace the requisite information. My own quest, made in wartime, with the probability that the manuscript used was in some Central European library, might have seemed desperate. But nowadays, in all matters connected with Jewish lore, one must take account of Palestinian Jewish scholarship: and, in Palestine, the Schocken Institute has put the study of medieval Hebrew poetry on a new and scientific basis, enormously facilitating the student’s labour. A tentative inquiry to the present director, Mr. A. M. Habermann, was enough to procure me by return of mail (a process which indeed occupied in the circumstances of 1942–43 something over half a year!) a transcript of the poem for which I was searching, based upon the superb and carefully indexed collection of photographs in the Institute’s possession. My gratitude to Mr. Habermann is combined with admiration for the organization that he has evolved.

The poem is apparently to be found in only a single manuscript—MS. 88 in the State Library of Munich, comprising the Liturgy for the whole year according to the Franco-German rite: it is very old—probably of the fourteenth century—and in correspondingly bad condition.

The name of the author of the poem is given in the acrostic at the beginning of

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3 Transactions, I, 8–14: full text in Kibbe al Íb, vol. iii, and (revised) in A. M. Habermann, Gezerot Ashkenaz veZarafath (Jerusalem 19 6) pp. 147–151.

4 Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie, p. 470; there are various indirect references, but all based on this.
the lines—after the initial alphabetical sequence—as "Joseph"; this is amplified in the heading as רֵעֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל מַרְפֵּר מְשָׁמְשַׁמְשׁ—i.e. "by Joseph of Chartres". We know of him 1 as a Biblical commentator and religious controversialist, though unfortunately none of his works have survived. Clearly he was a contemporary of the events of which he writes and must therefore have been born not later than the year 1170. Whether he had any special interest in England cannot be ascertained, 2 though Chartres lay fairly near the Angevin possessions in Northern France. It is to be noticed that the elegy deals specifically with the martyrs of York, whose fate so impressed Christian contemporaries as well as Jewish: Zunz's statement that it was on the martyrs of England generally (who are mentioned in fact only in a single line) is somewhat misleading. 3

The poem begins in general terms, deploring the massacre and extolling the victims: a great part of it might indeed have been written with reference to almost any other outbreak. Verse 8 breaks out into an understandable invective against the "King of the Isles" (sc. of England), the author obviously being ignorant of the fact that Richard and his ministers did what they could to suppress the attacks. From the King, the poet passes to his country; and verse 9 seems to be an unsympathetic allusion to the Crusade about to begin.

From verse 14, the references come to be more pointed and more interesting. The York Jews, as is well-known, took refuge in the Castle ("they were gathered together to the Fortress") but found themselves betrayed by the Warden ("the ruler oppressed them, and the enemy stood at his right hand"). They then apparently tried to bribe off the assailants (these are correctly referred to in verse 12 as an assembly of shepherds, i.e. of country-folk) with an offer of their property, but the latter were athirst for blood: "We are come for a feast day," they said. "Feast-Day" is in Hebrew יומ-תב, and the allusion is obviously to the synagogal poet and ṭosaphist R. Yom-Tob of Joigny, who is known to have met his death in the disorders: "a most famous Doctor of the Law... who, it is said, had come from the parts beyond the sea to teach the English Jews," in the words of the chronicler William of Newbury. It seems to be suggested that he was the special target of the assailants. Why this should be so is not easy to understand. But it is known that he too was a controversialist; 4 and it may be that he had been guilty of unguarded

1 Gross, Gallia Judaica, pp. 603–4: the name is generally written רֵעֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל.
2 I was in error in suggesting in the first edition of my History of the Jews in England, p. 270 (corrected however in the second edition), that the Elijah mentioned according to Zunz in this elegy is identical with the martyr Elijah, "nephew" of Joseph of Chartres (Revue des Études Juives, 1, 245). The dates make this impossible. See below.
3 The identifications in my History of the Jacob and Moses mentioned in the Elegy were based on this statement, and were corrected in the second edition.
4 See his explanation (Revue des Études Juives, iii, 4–5) of the verse Let us make man (Genesis i, 26), so beloved of medieval theologians as an allusion to the Trinity. (It is included in the polemical Book of Joseph the Zealous, written by a nephew of Joseph of Chartres, and containing an account of a large number of medieval religious controversies between Jews and Christians in France.) The passage, says he, refers to man and should be translated thus: "And God said that we should make man according to our image, after our likeness," being an injunction to marry and perpetuate the human race. The explanation is introduced by the author with the words: "And now I set forth the words of the Holy R. Yom-Tob of Joigny, who spake to me with his own mouth" (cf. R.E.J. i, 233–4).

For Yom-Tob (ben Isaac) of Joigny, author of the Atonement hymn Omnam Ren, see Revue des Études Juives, iii, 5: Gross, Gallia Judaica, pp. 252, 350: Zunz, Zur Geschichts, p. 100: Jacobs, Jews of Angevin England, pp. 109–111, and now my comprehensive monograph on the intellectual life of the Jews in Medieval England (British Academy, 1949), where information may be found on the other scholars mentioned in the present article.
utterances in religious discussion which exposed him to the resentment of the besiegers. The reference to him is particularly striking. He is spoken of in terms of the highest praise, as one who in the Talmudic phrase was well-founded as Sinai, yet brilliant enough to move mountains, and who, whether he taught from books or by word of mouth, was never known to err.

The names of other leading members of the community who met their deaths are then recorded. Now that we know them all to have been inhabitants of York, we may attempt to identify them:—

Moses (verse 11): Mosse, son of Sarah, mentioned in Pipe-Roll of 1177–8 as one of the leaders of the York community, 1 together with his brother Benedict (the victim of the Coronation Riot of 1189), Vivus 2 and Deodatus Episcopus (= Nathaniel haCohen ? 3).

Joseph (verse 17): Obviously the famous Josce of York, who (together with the Benedict mentioned above) had been one of the representatives of English Jewry who waited on Richard I at his coronation, escaped with his life, figures in the English chronicles as the leader of York Jewry, and is known to have perished in the massacre. His son, Aaron of York, the Archpresbyter of the reign of Henry III, is referred to as "haNadib", a phrase reserved for a patron of scholarship—a quality which he may have inherited from his father, who was perhaps responsible for bringing over R. Yom-Tob from Joigny to head a school of Talmudic studies in York. The poet’s praise of his charitableness seems to be more than a conventional phrase, and points to the existence of a needy Anglo-Jewish proletariat at this period. The reference in the previous hemistich, "We knew that the Gates of Prayer were closed" may imply that the Synagogue (where, in fact, Ephraim of Bonn places the massacre) was in his house, which we know to have been broken into and pillaged previously.

Elijah (verse 18): Without doubt, Elijah "the Martyr" of York referred to in Tosaphoth, Yoma 27a and Zebahim 14b as an acute rabbinical authority, 4 and also as I now find in Bodleian MS. Mich. 502, where he is spoken of as the uncle of R. Moses of London. 5 It is out of the question that he is identical with Elijah the Martyr, a kinsman of the author of this elegy (see Revue des Etudes Juives, i, 228 ff.) who must have lived about the middle of the thirteenth century. 6

According to Zunz’s note on this poem, the line "How goodly are thy tents, oh Jacob" refers to another of the York martyrs. If so, he is to be identified with the local capitalist Jurnet (the two names were used interchangeably in medieval England), whose name occurs in the Pipe Roll for 1176–77. But it seems to me that the phrase is employed here without any reference to any specific person, in eulogy of the "Tents of the Torah" exemplified by R. Yom-Tob’s work; otherwise, the

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2 Vivus (or Vives) is presumably identical with the Vives of "Everwic" mentioned by Judah of Metz in Tosaphoth to Yoma f. 7b: see Gross, Gallia Judaica, p. 23. It is interesting to note how the secular source confirms the conjecture made there.
3 I do not know if any of these persons here in question is to be identified with the "Magister" whose son Deulecresse was living at York in 1221 (Transactions, XI, 109). Yom-Tob had a son Isaac, who is frequently mentioned in the Tosaphoth; Joseph Jacobs considered him to be referred to in the roll of London Jewry of 1186 as "Isaac of Joigny".
4 Cf. Conforte, Kore haDoroth, ed. Cassel, p. 15b; and Gross, Gallia Judaica, p. 22.
6 See note above.
transition is too abrupt. Habermann on the other hand is of the opinion that verse 1 of the poem refers to a martyr named Benjamin. I however consider that (if his reading is correct) the name is used here in the sense of the tribe of Benjamin—i.e. the Jews; and my opinion is confirmed by the fact that no local worthy named bearing that name is traceable in the records.

The poem ends with a eulogy of the learning and wisdom of the martyrs, confirming the picture suggested throughout, that York was a notable seat of Talmudical scholarship. The same is implied by the phrasing of the elegy published by Schechter and by a statement in the Chronicle of Ephraim of Bonn: “They despooled their gold and silver and the splendid books which they had written in great number, precious as gold and as much fine gold, there being none like them for their beauty and splendour; these they brought to Cologne and other places, where they sold them to the Jews.” The general impression seems to be conveyed that, in the generation before 1190, rabbinical scholarship in England had been developing to a marked extent, the affluent circumstances of the Anglo-Jewish capitalists of the time being largely responsible for this. York was obviously one of the centres of this activity—perhaps the most important. The wealthy leaders of the community brought over at least one well-known scholar from abroad to further this work, and perhaps maintained students free of charge in the academy or academies which were set up. In York alone, there were at this time three scholars—Yom-Tob, Elijah, and Vives—who were of sufficient importance to be quoted in the Tosephoth, the North-French rabbinical encyclopaedia of the period. For the use of students, as it seems, the patrons of learning had manuscripts specially copied, either by skilled scribes working privately or perhaps (if Ephraim of Bonn’s eulogy is to be taken literally) in a little scriptorium established in imitation of that which doubtless existed in the Christian ecclesiastical establishments. All this was ended by the massacre of the Great Sabbath, 16th March, 1190. It seems that English Jewry never wholly recovered from the blow.

APPENDIX

The Hebrew original of Joseph of Chartres’ Elegy is here reproduced from the text published by me for the first time in Metsudah, vol. i (London, 1943), pp. 116–121. In my translation, however, I have followed in many cases (though not all) the emendations introduced by A. M. Habermann in the revised text included in his Gezeroth Ashkenaz veZarphath (Jerusalem, 1946), pp. 152–4: in certain points of interpretation I venture nevertheless to differ from him. The original is replete with Biblical and Talmudical allusions and reminiscences, which it would be superfluous to indicate constantly.

1 The somewhat indeterminate and conventional phraseology of the elegy by Menachem ben Jacob, as published by Schechter, seems to confirm this: cf. stanza 4: “Those crowned with the Torah . . . who turned back war at the gates”. It may be noticed that this elegy seems to have been posterior to the events to which it describes, as it contains (stanza 7) an allusion to the manner of Richard’s death.

2 If it is true that a sort of scriptorium for the copying of Hebrew MSS. existed here, the fact may throw some light on the activities of the Nakdanim or Punctuators who seem to have been relatively common at this period in England.

3 For the general details of the York Massacre, see my History of the Jews in England, pp. 22–4 and 270, with the references there given and the relevant source-material in Jacobs’ Jews of Angevin England.
ELEGY BY R. JOSEPH OF CHARTRES ON THE MARTYRS OF YORK

1 Oh God! Lords other than Thee have possessed us; the waters of treachery have almost ended us.
While Thou wast as one dumb, hiding Thy face—the breaker came and smote mother upon children.

2 Daughter of my people! shear thee, throw off thy chaplet; for the wicked boasteth, and the covetous blesseth.
Bring the foe's sword back to the scabbard; thy wound is mortal, with no healing nor cure.

3 I gave my back and my cheeks to those who plucked them; and for Thy name Thy people are brought to the sword.
Thy servants (Dread one!) stand for judgment—fathers to be slain upon the children.

4 The judgment of their Creator they accepted, nor did they break off His yoke: they admitted the righteousness of the Righteous One—the Rock whose way is perfect, And in whose temple all speak of His glory—"let us fall in the hand of God, and not of man".

5 Saying of father and mother "I have seen him not", and of his only son "I did not bear him."
I am changed to one that is cruel, and I consider him as a stranger: was it for this that I loved him and brought him near to me?

6 And there was lamentation and woe, in her who was so tender and delicate. The very land quaked, and her people melted.
My virgins moan, and my young men moan: "Ah me, for my soul is weary for the killers."

7 They remembered their Creator, and His covenant was not broken. May their blood be more acceptable to Thee than that of a lamb or young ox!
Oh land! cover not their blood with thy dust, but only with the blood of him who shed it; till it is covered, let it be unavenged!

8 My bitter anger is against thee, King of the Isles, under whose robe is the blood of innocent souls;
May God visit my people's slain on the bands of Kittim; may their lot be eternal life!

9 May there be no dew nor rain on the Land of the Isle; from the day thy King was crowned, woe to thee, O Land!
O daughter of my people, get up from its midst and go forth! "Did I see this there after my vision?"

10 God said: "I will bring back from Bashan and from the depths, and from the sea, both young men and young women."
My enemies wasted the Clusters on the vine, both the dried-up and the fresh; and gleanings only were left.

11 When they came among the corn, they did not only snatch the ears; those who bound the sheaves waved the sickle.
They surrounded Benjamin, and drove him with the right hand. The oppressors reviled them: "These have no Lord."
Let it not come unto you, all ye who pass by the way! Behold and see if there be any pain like unto my pain, which they have smitten me.

Mine enemies have found evil; an assembly of shepherds has come together and yearling oxen are slaughtered before mine eyes.

Would that my eyes were as the flood-bearing stars taken from the Pleiades; then could I weep for the daughter of my people year by year.

Anger has arisen according to the number of the days of the sun; I moan, 'why did the Lord impose it?'

They were gathered together to the Fortress, together with those with them; but the Prince (sc. Warden) oppressed them, and the enemy stood at his right hand.

We said 'Plunder our property'. They replied: 'No, for we are come for a feast-day.' (Yom-Tob.)

Sinai he, and one who could move mountains; he made the crooked straight. Whether he taught by mouth or book, he was not among those who err.

May he rest in quiet: may his flesh not decay: how goodly are thy tents, oh Jacob!

The Holy Congregation was altogether like unto him, and stood dumb like a lamb before the Shearers.

A heavenly voice moaned from Horeb like a dove: "Woe is me! Woe is me! My servant Moses is dead."

The foxes’ whelps made a great breach, and we knew that the gates of prayer were closed, when Joseph was gathered up—Joseph, man of life, mighty of deed, who used to send the barefoot new-shod on their road.

The righteous moaned after God; all who hear their report are astounded.

"Elijah!" called the Angel: and he bade him: "Tell thy master that Elijah comes."

The voice of the lamentation of my people is heard in distant lands, for worthless slew the righteous men.

Whether for life or for death they cleaved to the Lord; they transgressed not His law, nor did they change His precepts [by accepting baptism].

First, with warm waters; and then, with scalding, when the leaders were sacrificed like oxen.

My princes are desolate; my priests groan; for He has abhorred the princes of my people's daughter with scalding.

There Thy holy ones kept the watch, sanctified Thee to bring Thy dread until the morning watch.

There died princes of fifties and of tens, and in other cities too which I know not how to tell.

In place of their herds they offered up their children, and they slaughtered their first-strength before their eyes.

Those holy ones did not hold back their only children from Thee; for their father's manner they too maintained.

Those who dwelt in the Tents [of the Torah] are firm-planted as pavilions: those who ponder their learning and build towers in the heavens;

When my sages were gathered up, and my scrolls were rolled together—the letters flying heavenwards, though the parchment burned.
How dear were these friends! How strong were the leaders! Yet there, the needy were not distinguished from the princes.

The wise of lore and understanding of speech—the eternity of Israel, his chariot and horsemen—

Their speech was pure, clarified as heavens; whether it was lengthy or short, as in Judah and in Galilee.

Holy mouths taught the law of Calendar and of Sacrifice; Thou didst accept it like incense and whole-offering.

They did visit Thee in their agony, when Thy visitation was on them: each one gave up his soul and yielded forth his blood.

May this be pleasing to the great King, like the offerings in His Shrine: aye, the Land atoned for his People.

Our hands became weak when we heard their cry, and we knew that their temples were become scarlet as pieces of pomegranate.

May their dust rest in the bond of eternal Life: this is the inheritance of the servants of the Lord and the meed of their righteousness.

(sic) דרב תושה מקרמריא על קורישה יבכרכ

A HEBREW ELEGY ON THE YORK MARTYRS OF 1190
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AHEBREW ELEGY ON THE YORK MARTYRS OF 1190

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