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The Other One Who Curses the Fig Tree

*A Jewish Counter-Narrative to
Christian Missionary Endeavours*

Introduction

The following essay is dedicated to a fascinating narrative that emerges within Jewish-Christian relations at the beginning of the modern era, during a period of extreme Christian pressure upon the Jewish communities of Western Europe. Unfortunately, this small piece of text is difficult to interpret and, moreover, has only been, to the best of my knowledge, incorporated into one written source. The text in question tells of a famous Jewish scholar who bears a name familiar to readers of the New Testament and performs an action also familiar to this very audience: that is, a certain Nathanael curses a fig tree. The relevant text is brief but is peppered with literary allusions and citations:

ה'ר' נתנאל שקלל אץ התאנ

ה. ונקרא כן על שם מעשה שאירע כי היה גדול בתורה ובמעשים טובים ובכל ערב שבת היה רוחץ פניו ידיו ורגליו ומתעטב בטלית דומה למלאך ה' צבאות ויהי היום ערב שבת עשה כפעם בפעם ולעולם היתה בידו טבעת בגוון המלכים והשרים שהיה עשיר גדול והיתה בטבעת עבן יקרה והיתה בביתה תאנה א' ושם את הטב עת באילן ורחץ פניו ידיו ורגליו ושכה את הטבעת. ליום ראשון נזכר מהטבעת ויבקש ולא מצא כי לא נזכר שהניחו בעילן ונתמלא חמה ואמר מי שנתלו ויבש העילן ולא נתן פרי כפעם בפעם. ויהי מקץ שנים שלש צוה לחתוך אותו שכן הוא הדין מאחר שאינו עושה פרי, וכאשר התחילו לקוצץ מצאו הטבעת ומרוב השמחה שכחו את העילן ויניחוהו מיד נתן פריו והפריה ניצו כאשר בתחילה. ויקראו שמו כן רבי נתנאל מקלל התאנה.¹

1 David, 'Two Chronicles', p. 28.

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Rabbi Nathanael, who cursed the fig tree.

But he was so called because of an event that occurred. For he was a great one in Torah and in deeds [מעשים]. Every Shabbat evening he used to wash his face and his hands and his feet. Wrapped in his tallit, he resembled an angel of the Eternal Tzeva'ot.

But it was on one Erev Shabbat, [that] he did as he did every time and always. And he had on his hand a ring in the manner of kings and nobles, for he was a very rich man. There was also a precious stone in the ring, and there was a fig tree by his house. And he put the ring in the tree, and washed his face, and his hands, and his feet, and forgot the ring. On the first day he remembered the ring and searched, but found nothing, for he did not remember that he had put it in the tree. Then he was filled with wrathful fury and said, "Whoever has taken it [his life shall be taken]". Then the fig tree dried up and gave no fruit, as it always had [before]. And it was at the end of three years that he commanded it to be cut down, for so it was right, after it had given no fruit. But when they began to cut it down, they found the ring. And from great joy they forgot the tree and left it alone – then it immediately gave its fruit and sprouted its blossom as at first. Thus, they called his name: Rabbi Nathanael, the curser of the fig tree.

It is relatively easy to demonstrate that this narrative contains a number of central motifs and metaphors familiar to rabbinic and New Testament literature, that is to say, from much earlier periods in the history of Jewish and Christian identity formation. It is far more difficult to establish the intention behind this story and interpret its meaning. This interpretative difficulty is based on the fact that rabbinic authors, in particular, only rarely expressed their attitude towards deviant Jewish groups (such as Christianity) directly in the form of apologetic or polemical treatises, but rather cloaked them in dazzling narratives.²

Although it is difficult to interpret intentions from historical texts and their narratives, we can nevertheless see that some of these narratives offer insight into the dynamics of religious co-production. In this case, I will suggest that the above sixteenth-century story offers a 'reclamation' of the figure of the convert Nathanael in the New Testament, presenting the rabbi as a 'true Israelite' for fifteenth/sixteenth-century Jewish communities that were under massive and often violent pressure to convert to Christianity.

2 This difficulty was particularly evident in the question of whether and where Jesus of Nazareth (and his followers) are to be found in the corpus of rabbinic texts. The spectrum of scholarly (!) positions actually ranges from 'everywhere', held by so-called 'maximalists' (such as Peter Schäfer and Joseph Klausner) to 'nowhere', as the 'Minimalists' (e.g. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Johann Maier) claim. Compare Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*; Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*; Lauterbach, 'Jesus in the Talmud', pp. 444–570; Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung*.

Historical Context of the Text's Author

Our short narrative is embedded in a Jewish chronicle called *Ha-Sh'lamat Sefer ha-Qabbala* ('Completion of the Book of Tradition').³ Its author, Abraham ben Solomon Torrutiel, wanted it to be understood as a continuation of a larger and by far more famous Jewish chronicle — the *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* ('Book of Tradition') of Abraham ibn Daud (c. 1110–1180).⁴ With ibn Daud's 'Book of Tradition,' written around 1161, the philosopher and astronomer from Cordoba aimed to prove an unbroken chain of tradition in Israel from rabbinic times to his own era. In a way, the *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* functions as a kind of historical excursus to ibn Daud's main philosophical work, the *Sefer Emuna Rama*. It could have been intended ultimately as part of a larger project, which Cohen describes as 'the defense of Judaism through reason and history'.⁵

Between the *Sefer ha-Qabbala* and its 'completion,' however, yawns the abyss of the downfall of Iberian Jewry. The expulsion edicts of the Spanish (1492) and Portuguese (1497) kings 'merely' marked the end of an ongoing crisis: its starting point had been the mass conversions of Spanish Jews after the massacres of 1391 and the coercive measures that followed, such as the Dispensation of Tortosa in 1413/1414. The most pressing and painful question that Jewish authors of those years had to answer, then, was the reason for the lack of loyalty of so many Jews to the tradition of their ancestors. *Ha-Sh'lamat Sefer ha-Qabbala*, completed around 1510, stands entirely in the shadow of this catastrophe.

Its author, Abraham ben Torrutiel, was one of the Spanish Jews whose families had chosen a perilous flight into exile over baptism.⁶ In the year of the Al-Hambra-Edict, ordering the expulsion of all Jews, he (at the age of ten) and his father left Castile for the Moroccan city of Fez. His father, a Talmudic scholar, was one of the students of the famous 'Gaon' Yitzchak Canpanton (1340–1463). The son was educated in Morocco, mainly by refugees from Portugal. In later years, he is said to have run his own yeshiva in Fez. Two halachic rulings, one each from 1526 and 1571, bear his signature, among

3 השלמת ספר ישקבלה. I.e. Completion of the Book of Tradition.

4 Critical edition: Cohen, *A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-qabbalah) by Abraham Ibn Daud* [henceforth *Sefer ha-Qabbala*].

5 'It will be seen that the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* was essentially nothing but a historical excursus, the detailed evidence for Ibn Daud's contention that Judaism is validated principally by its claim to being an uninterrupted tradition, and further supported by the general consensus of its adherents' (Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbala*, p. xxxi).

6 Only a few details about the life and work of Abraham b. Torrutiel have survived. For equally sparse secondary literature, see Saenz-Badillos, 'Abraham ben Solomon', p. 311; David, 'Two Chronicles', pp. 9–12. Two manuscripts of Torrutiel's chronicle exist: one is kept in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the other, of North African origin, in the National Library in Jerusalem. *Ha-Sh'lamat* was published in three works, first in Harkavi, *New and Old*, II, pp. 284–304, then in Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles*, I, pp. 101–14, and finally in David, 'Two Chronicles', pp. 21–41.

others. In addition to his chronicle, Abraham is credited with a Kabbalistic work called *Avné Sikharon*.⁷

Like the original *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, his chronicle, written and completed in Fez, has a three-part structure. In the first two parts, the work represents additions and a continuation of the chronicle of Abraham ibn Daud. Baer suggested that Abraham ben Torrutiel and his more famous contemporaries Joseph ben Zaddik of Arévalo and Abraham Zacut (1452–1515), in their parallel endeavours, used the same Hebrew source, which unfortunately has not survived.⁸ In the third part, ibn Torrutiel gives a highly moving account of the fate of the Jews under the kings of Spain and Portugal until the settlement of a new Jewish community in Fez. He himself having been a victim of the events, judged them to be God's punishment for the comprehensive failure of the leading elite of Spanish Jewry.

The story of Rabbi Nathanael, to which we will now return, is found in the second part of *Ha-Sh'lamat*, as ibn Torrutiel continues ibn Daud's chronicle, which ends in 1161, until about the year 1463.

The Ambiguous Literary Images of the Narrative

The narrative formally corresponds to an aetiological myth, i.e. it explains how a well-known scholar got his name. This, however, almost exhausts the certainties in the literary setting of the text. The question arises as to how the short episode is to be understood and how it found its way into the collection of Abraham ibn Torrutiel.

If one assumes that the story of Nathanael has a broader meaning, then the contrast between the detailed introduction and the legendary elements that follow is striking: a learned and charismatic rabbi prepares for the Sabbath in an exemplary manner. He has a precious ring and a fig tree, which dominate subsequent events.

The Precious Ring — Hidden in the Fig Tree

With the fig tree and the ring with a precious stone we move onto rich metaphorical ground. The fig tree points to the people of Israel or to an eschatological peace in which everyone will one day sit under a fig tree and vine.⁹ In medieval legends, the ring with the precious stone was widely interpreted as

7 Saenz-Badillos, 'Abraham ben Solomon'.

8 Joseph's chronicle can be found in the last chapter of his halachic work *Zekher Tzaddik* (Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, I, pp. 85–100), which he wrote between 1467 and 1487. *Sefer ha-Yuhasin* (ספר הייחסין) is by far the best known and most widely received of this series. From some remarks within the *Sefer ha-Sh'lamat*, one can conclude that Abraham knew and possibly used both the *Sefer ha-Yuhasin* and the *Zekher Tzaddik*. Baer, *Untersuchungen über Quellen und Kompositionen des Schebet Jehuda*, p. 28.

9 See 1 Kings 5. 5; cf. Micah 4. 4; Zechariah 3. 10.

referring to one's own religious tradition, which in Nathanael's case would be the Jewish tradition.¹⁰ In ibn Verga's version, the king 'Don Pedro the Old' summons the Jew Ephraim to find out whether Judaism or Christianity is the better religion. The Jew's answer is clothed in the guise of a parable:

As to the religions, Ephraim tells of his neighbor who left each of his two sons a precious stone. The sons have now exerted violent pressure on Ephraim to determine which stone exceeds the other in value. Ephraim explains that the two brothers are Jacob and Esau; and, should the king wish to determine the more valid one of their respective religious legacies, 'let him send an ambassador to our father in heaven, since he is the greatest gemologist of all, and he will differentiate between the stones' (p. 80). The king accepts Ephraim's argument, admonishing [...] that forced conversion of the Jews would never prove effective.¹¹

If we take these common interpretations of the fig tree and gemstone/ring as a basis for decoding the Nathanael narrative, certain difficulties arise: an exemplary Jewish scholar places his ring — the Jewish tradition in its broadest sense — in the fig tree/Israel. He forgets it, curses the thief and thus forgets, albeit accidentally, Israel. He thus inflicts serious damage on his people, which fortunately can be repaired after three years.

Is such an interpretation plausible or even possible? Is the legend speaking metaphorically of an apostate? Of someone who returns to his roots after a while? Or of a leader who is negligent in his treatment of Jewish tradition?

Interpretation is further complicated by the story's placement within the chronicle. It is inserted into the account of the expulsion of the Jews from France in the early fourteenth century. Several historical contexts could therefore be equally relevant to interpret the narrative: the story could relate to the expulsion of the French Jews, and/or to the persecution of the Jews on the Iberian Peninsula until 1497. In addition, there are the possible connections between the two contexts, which could have been the reason for Abraham ben Torrutiell to deal with the fig tree narrative.

10 Examples of Christian ring parables are found in Classen, *Religious Toleration*. Particularly interesting for comparison with the Nathanael narrative would be the example of Jans Enikel's *World Chronicle* (end of thirteenth century; Classen, *Religious Toleration*, pp. 117–23), in which a structurally similar but fragmentary narrative about a precious table is inserted, which is cut into three parts. At about the same time, in the *Gesta Romanorum* (tale LXXXIX), a ring is indeed bequeathed — and (as the interpretation suggests), by Christ, explicitly only to the youngest son, while the two older ones receive the inheritance (the Holy Land, which is given to the Jews) and the treasure (earthly riches, which is given to the Muslims) — comp. Classen, *Religious Toleration*, pp. 165–67. Here, as possibly in Abraham's *Chronicle*, the ring parable is used apologetically. By contrast, a similar parable is found with an 'open ending' in the famous versions of the Novellino (no. 73; end of the thirteenth century; Classen, *Religious Toleration*, pp. 183–85) and in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* II (c. 1350, Classen, *Religious Toleration*, pp. 187–235).

11 Cohen, *A Historian in Exile*, pp. 24–25.

The Precious Ring ... and Whether to Wear it on Shabbat

In addition to the Ring Parable, which is known in many languages and cultural contexts, it is important to point out another subtext that is specific to the Jewish tradition and which could be significant for the interpretation of this story. It is to be found in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Eruvin.

The starting point of the Talmudic discussion is particularly instructive for our story because it deals with the question of who is to be regarded as an apostate [מומר].¹²

A certain man once went out with a jewelled charm but when he observed R. Judah Nesi'ah he covered it up.¹³ 'A person of this type', [the Master said.] 'is in accordance with the view of R. Judah entitled to renounce his share'. R. Huna stated: Who is regarded as an Israelite in mumar? He who desecrates the Sabbath in public. [...] R. Nahman b. Isaac replied: Only in respect of presenting or renouncing his right to his share, this being in agreement with what was taught:¹⁴ An Israelite mumar who observes the

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- 12 On the complicated terminology between apostate and voluntary or forced convert (מומר, משומר, ערוס), see Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain*, pp. 6–22; Zeitlin, 'Mumar and Meshumad', pp. 84–86; Zsom, *Conversos*, pp. 5–6. Zsom resumes: 'A person disregarding one or more religious precept for whatever reason is referred to in Hebrew as *mumar* ("non-observant", with regard to that specific precept, or with regard to Jewish law in general) which is a neutral denomination. A person compelled to violate one or more commandment for whatever reason (out of fear, ignorance, inevitable necessity, etc.) is called *anus* (a "forced one"). One who disregards a precept or Jewish law in general is called *meshumad* ("renegade" or "apostate"). All three denominations were used to refer to *conversos*, but in the majority of cases, the last two terms were used' (Zsom, *Conversos*, pp. 5–6).
- 13 Jewelled charm (הומרתא): The term used here was difficult to understand already in Talmudic times. William Davidson's edition of the Talmud (accessed via Sefaria.org) translates *humartá* in bEruvin as 'coral ring' — referring to bShabbat 59b. Rashi gets to the heart of the disparate meanings of the term as well as the main halakhic points of discussion when he comments on the passage bEruvin 69a: 'A ring stamped with a different material. Thus say the sages in bShabbat 49[b]: If it is of red coral and stamped with metal — it is forbidden to go out [on Shabbat] with a stamped *humartá* in the public domain — as I have shown according to tractate bShabbat. However, I will not deal here with the matter of Shabbat, but [only] with the issue of impurity. I say that a *humartá* is permissible [to transport] in the public domain if the perfume is of a type of *bessamim* and that is like what is said bShabbat (fol. 62). That one does not go out with "*humartá de-Phyllon*" and is therefore guilty of a sin offering because it is a "burden" and not an ornament for man' בחומרתא דמדושה - טבעת שחומתמה ממין אחר ואמרי' במסכת שבת (דף נט) היא של אלמוג והותמה (של) מתכת אסור לצאת בה חומרתא חותם מדושה לא אתפרש ובדקתי במס' שבת ולא נשנית שם לענין שבת אלא לענין טומאה ואומר אני חומרתא דמדושה קשר של בושם אחד ממיני הבשמים וכי האי גוונא אמרי' בשבת (דף סב) דאין יוצאין בחומרתא דפילון והייב עליו חטאת משום דמשאוי הוא ואינו תכשיט אדם.
- 14 The debate in the Talmud refers to mEruvin V, 1–2, where the question of whether or not a courtyard shared with non-Jews or apostates can be made into an *eruv* is discussed. An *eruv* (ערוב; Hebrew: 'mixture') is an area defined by courtyards or streets that is used communally by Jews. It can enable the transport of objects over longer distances because they are labelled as shared private land. To define an *eruv*, it is therefore important to determine who can be

Sabbath in public may renounce his share, but one who does not observe the Sabbath in public may not renounce his share. [...] From here it has been inferred that sacrifices may be accepted from transgressors in Israel, in order that they might return in repentance, all except from a mumar, from one who offers libations of wine to idols and from one who publicly desecrates the Sabbath.¹⁵

The extract chosen here from the Talmudic discussion begins with a precedent: someone is walking around outside on Shabbat with a gemstone ring — which is a desecration of Shabbat¹⁶ — but immediately hides it when observed. This raises the question of whether this person is to be located within or already outside the Jewish community (i.e. if he renounces his share of a commonly used yard, an eruv can be erected there). The answer of the scholars is quite clear: the person in this case hides his ring, i.e. does not publicly desecrate the Sabbath — thus he is still within the community.

The thesis that follows is: anyone who publicly desecrates the Sabbath is an apostate. What is interesting for the interpretation of our fig tree episode is the fact that, in the above passage, membership in the Jewish community is dealt with using the example of a ring worn either openly or covertly in public on Shabbat. These parallel motifs link the Talmudic tradition with our narrative. It is too much to be mere coincidence. Eruvin 69a–b should therefore be regarded as a subtext of the Rabbi Nathanael episode under examination in this article.

If we apply the Talmudic scheme to Rabbi Nathanael, he would of course not be an apostate, as he hides his ring in the fig tree. It is therefore no coincidence that the loss of the precious ring, behind which one may assume one's own tradition, occurs on a Shabbat. The regulations and decisions attached to honouring of the weekly day of rest dictates whether Rabbi Nathanael loses 'his share' or not. He does not.

Nathanael Under the Fig Tree

Outside the canonical Jewish tradition, there is another narrative whose imagery is used in the short story about Rabbi Nathanael and which essentially revolves around belonging, searching, and finding. Here I am talking about an episode reported in the Fourth Gospel (John 1. 43–51) concerning the calling of Jesus's first disciples.

Overall, this pericope is a two-part narrative: the Gospel first tells of the encounter between two of John the Baptist's disciples and Peter (John 1.

considered Jewish and who cannot. The matter becomes even more complicated if a non-Jewish or otherwise suspicious resident renounces their share of the yard or road — which is discussed here.

15 bEruvin 69a–b (Soncino).

16 Because he is carrying something from the private to the public domain.

35–42); then, ‘the next day’ (John 1. 43), of the calling of Philip and Nathanael (1. 43–51). The *finding* of the first disciples unfolds logically through personal relationships between those called. John the Baptist draws the attention of two of his disciples, including Andrew, to Jesus (‘Behold, this is the Lamb of God; John 1. 36). Andrew *finds* (1. 41) his brother Simon. For his part, Jesus *finds* Philip the following day (1. 43). Now it is Philip’s turn to *find* Nathanael (1. 45). The verb ‘to find’ (εὕρισκειν), the key word of the narrative, theologically charges the process of calling the disciples:

He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated ‘the Christ’). [...] ⁴³ The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ (John 1. 41, 43–45, NKJV)

In the double structure of the narrative, the emphasis is on the last person to be called (Simon and Nathanael), who are each ‘recognised’ by Jesus in a special way (see John 1. 42, 47–50).

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ ⁴⁶ And Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!’ ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to Him, ‘How do You know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’ ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ ⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Because I said to you, “I saw you under the fig tree”, do you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ ⁵¹ And He said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’ (John 1. 45–51, NKJV)

The verb ‘to see’ functions as the second key word of the disciples’ vocations (John 1. 42, 46, 47, 48, 50, 51). Jesus ‘sees’ and recognizes the identity of Simon and Nathanael. Those called will ‘see’ heaven openly and recognize the nature of Jesus, the Son of Man.¹⁷ In contrast, Nathanael is identified by Jesus as

17 Similarly Motyer, ‘Narrative Theology’, p. 206: ‘There is a mutual “seeing” of Jesus by the disciples, and of the disciples by Jesus, a seeing which culminates in the dramatic promise of 1. 51. [...] This mutual seeing is underlined by the mutual “finding” in the center of the section — again, with Jesus and the four disciples sharing the roles of subject and object.’ The word field ‘see’ occurs in the pericope a total of 14 (!) times.

a ‘true Israelite’. The special nature of his calling is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that he raises an objection to the Messiahship of the Nazarene. A true Israelite’, as the episode could be summarized, sits under a fig tree and doubts the Messiahship of Jesus.

Another unique phenomenon of the Nathanael scene is the unusual name. ‘Nathanael’ is rarely found in biblical and rabbinical literature, but, in contrast to Philip and Andrew, could pass as authentically Hebrew. If so, then Nathanael may be meant to represent an exemplary figure who embodies a full-blooded Israelite and scholar, so to speak, who becomes a follower of Jesus.¹⁸

The Nathanael of John’s gospel is the pious, well trained, God-fearing (but sceptical) Jew, a member of God’s Chosen People by spiritual birth rather than by heredity (cf. Romans 9:6–8), the ideal Israelite (Ἰσραηλίτης) as opposed to the unbelieving Jew (Ἰουδαῖος) who with his nation has rejected the Messiah.¹⁹

Researchers, in the absence of more precise information about the reason why Nathanael was identified as a ‘true Israelite’, have wondered what he was doing under the tree.²⁰ But perhaps his sitting there is precisely the point, one that provides a link to the Hebrew Bible, where ‘sitting under the fig tree’ serves as an essential metaphor for peaceful living (1 Kings 5. 5; Micah 4. 4; Zechariah 3. 10; etc.). J. R. Michaels has suggested considering Hosea 9. 10 as a background text for the Nathanael pericope:²¹

I found Israel / As grapes in the wilderness; / your fathers seemed to Me / Like the first fig to ripen on a fig tree. (Hosea 9. 10, New JPS)

The fascinating aspect of this idea lies in the terminological parallels. Here, too, the reference to the Hebrew Bible as a pictorial source is omnipresent and decisive for the interpretation of a New Testament narrative. For modern readers, the high proportion of implicit allusions makes it, nevertheless, difficult to notice this correlation.

Only in the Fourth Gospel does Nathanael appear to us as an archetypal Israelite who, in accordance with the prophetic promises, stays ‘under the fig tree’ to express his urgent hope for the end of this eon of oppression.

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- 18 Another indication of the possibility that Nathanael is to be presented as a scribe of Israel is the recognition of Jesus by Nathanael (v. 49). The form of address ‘Rabbi’, used often and usually pointedly in John, frames (John 1. 38, 49) the calling of the disciples.
- 19 Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, p. 219. See also Motyer, ‘Narrative Theology’, p. 208: ‘Nathanael is best understood as a passionate nationalist — an “Israelite indeed!” Jesus identifies Nathanael as a mighty champion of Israel’s cause — a Zealot in spirit, if not in action — and in return Nathanael calls Jesus “King of Israel”, that is, identifies him as a political liberator.’
- 20 In Jewish tradition, sitting under trees is often used to describe scenes of study (QohR v. 11. 2; ShirR vi. 2. 2: study under the fig tree; bChag 14b: a merkavah vision under an olive tree).
- 21 Michaels, ‘Nathanael Under the Fig Tree’, pp. 182–83.

In the context of ‘the other’ Nathanael narrative, a ring is lost, which on the one hand stands as a metaphor for a religious tradition in various parables, and on the other hand (cf. bEruvin 69) serves as a means of determining membership of Judaism.

On Cutting Fruit Trees

Said Rabbi Chaniná: My son Shivchat would not have died if he had not cut down the fig tree at the wrong time.²²

The question of whether the seemingly barren tree should be cut down at all is another fascinating aspect touched upon in the fig tree episode.²³ The background to the debate is the halakhic and exegetical discussion about Deuteronomy 20. 19, where it says:

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them.²⁴ Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you in the besieged city? (New JPS)

However, the interpretation of Deuteronomy 20. 20 extends far beyond the warfare, as the introductory Talmudic quotation makes clear. The ban on destroying trees in general and fruit trees in particular is extended from the siege situation into a matter of course in civilisation by means of an a fortiori conclusion. The generic halachic term for this behaviour (בל תשחית) describes the careful handling of the gifts of creation.²⁵ Thus, Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1087–1167) summarizes: ‘Look, do not destroy a fruit tree, which is a source of sustenance for human life’ (Commentary on Deuteronomy 20. 20).²⁶

The accumulation of these allusions in just one short episode, all of which are suitable for shaping and strengthening Jewish identity, can hardly be called coincidental. Together, the New Testament Gospels provide four common motifs with this story: the tree and the name (John 1. 45–51), the curse and the three years of time (Matthew 21. 18–22 par; Luke 13. 6–9) granted to the barren tree.²⁷ What additional meaning do these comparanda give to the story?

22 bBQ 91b: אָמַר רַבִּי חַנִּינְיָא: לֹא שָׁכִיב שִׁיבְחַת בְּרִי, אֲלֵא דַקְוֹן תְּאַיְנַתָּא בְּלֵא זְמַנָּה. See tSukkah II. 5(6).

23 ‘But it was at the end of three years that he commanded it to be cut down, for so it is right, after it had given no fruit’. See Luke 13. 6–9: He also spoke this parable: ‘A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. 7 Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, “Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?” 8 But he answered and said to him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. 9 And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down” (NKJV).

24 For example, to make palisades or siege equipment.

25 See bShabb 67b, 105b; bHull 7b; bKidd 32a et al. Maimonides makes a more restrictive judgement in MT Melakhim VI. 9.

26 Translation: Strickman and Silver, trans., *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch*.

27 There is no hint of a three-year grace period in classical halakha. Luke may have derived this

It seems as if the episode surrounding Rabbi Nathanael has become a kind of counter or alternative story to the pericopes of the New Testament: the fig tree withers only temporarily. After three years, shortly before the fig is about to be cut down, the ring is 'found'. Rabbi Nathanael sticks to the tradition of his forefathers or returns to it; he does not become or remain a follower of the Nazarene. Thus, Israel survives and with it the hope of an end to the decline.

In a final step, we must now ask how the narrative may have been understood at the time it was written down in the chronicle, i.e. in 1510. Why did Abraham ben Tortrutiel incorporate it into his work? How does this small, light, hopeful story fit into the horrific scenario of refugee movements, death, and loss?

Historical Contexts: Interpretive Hypotheses

In the Middle Ages, there were two major options regarding the treatment of forced converts who were willing to return: one of them goes back to the scholars in northern France or Ashkenaz, while the other originated in the Sephardic context and is most prominently represented by Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides). The aim of the scholars was to make it easier for repentant forced converts to return to Judaism. Rabbi Gershom of Mainz (960–1040), for example, threatened anyone who reminded re-Judaizers of their dishonour with a ban.²⁸ The great northern French Bible and Talmud commentator Rashi (1040–1105) wrote a comprehensive halakhic declaration on the status of converts. He was brave enough to apply the Talmudic dictum 'Israel that has sinned is still Israel'²⁹ to the individual:

And so are the baptised (האנוסים), for their hearts are turned towards heaven, and Rabbi Illo points out that their end is to be judged because of their beginning, for they returned and departed from there when they found salvation.³⁰

Accordingly, Rashi still considered a (forcibly) baptized Jew (אנוס) to be a Jew. However, he expected those who wanted to return to live a Jewish life to have made secret efforts to do so beforehand or, where this was not possible, to make serious penance for violating the commandments afterwards. It was assumed that they avoided situations in which they would have had to

detail from Leviticus 19. 23: 'When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden for you, not to be eaten' (New JPS). Classical halakha such as bBQ 91b has only general restrictions against cutting off fruit trees, but no precise grace periods.

28 According to legend, Gershom of Mainz himself had a son who renounced Judaism during the persecution of the Jews in Mainz in 1012. Even though his son died a Christian, Rabbenu Gershom is said to have mourned him according to Jewish custom and thus set an example for others to follow.

29 bSan 44a: חטא ישראל אמר רבי אבא בר זבדא אף על פי שחטא ישראל הוא

30 Rashi, Responsa § 171, 4.

disregard commandments. If the returnees showed the necessary seriousness and intense repentance, they were to be readmitted without restriction.³¹

Moses ben Maimon (commonly known as Maimonides), especially in his famous letter on conversion (*Iggeret ha-Sh'mad*), decreed that one should undergo forced conversion rather than be killed.³² A converso was therefore also considered a Jew in Maimonides' eyes. However, an אנוס would be expected to leave the land of persecution as soon as possible so that he could then openly return to Judaism. For Maimonides, the difference between a pro forma convert and a 'true' convert was therefore not primarily shown by the latter's willingness to repent, but by the quickest possible flight into exile. However, anyone who remained in the land of persecution was to be regarded as a convert and apostate (משומד) and was considered a 'voluntary worshipper of a foreign deity'.

The number of conversions from Judaism to Christianity in medieval Ashkenaz was probably still manageable, apart from the time of the Crusades.³³ Developments on the Iberian Peninsula were to become much more dramatic: After the intrusion of the Almoravids (1082) and the Almohads (from 1145), there had already been acts of violence, conversions and refugee movements of Christians and Jews in Islamic Spain. However, all this was only a foreshadowing of what was to happen in Christian Spain from 1391 onwards. People in almost all the large Jewish communities were subjected to intense persecution. Many died, but many more were baptised.³⁴

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- 31 Jakob Rabbajnu Tam (1100–1170) and even the Hasidic Ashkenaz held similarly liberal views, although the latter did provide for extensive penitential exercises (see Fram, 'Perception', p. 304. The *Sefer Hasidim* (MS Bologna 203) states: 'If an apostate returns to Judaism and takes upon himself to do *teshuvah* according to the instructions of the rabbis, then from the moment he commits himself to this we are permitted to drink wine with him and count him as the tenth man in a *minyán*, provided he behaves like a Jew' (translation: *Sefer Chasidim*, ed. by Finkel, p. 353). Emphases in the original.
- 32 *Iggeret ha-Sh'mad*, fol. 11a.b; somewhat more rigorous: MT *Hilkhot Jessodé Tora* v. I. 4.
- 33 'Clearly, apostasy/martyrdom was the significant legal problem for Jews during the Crusades. Prior and after the Crusades, the matter is less certain. One does not get the impression from the sources that in the pre- and post-Crusade era in Franco-Germany apostasies have ever reached the proportions that they did in England in the 1240s and 1250s where there were concerted efforts at converting the Jews and perhaps up to ten percent of the Jewish population of 3,000 apostatized'. Fram, 'Perception', p. 302. See also Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God*; Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, p. 68.
- 34 The extent of death, expulsion or apostasy in the wake of the persecutions of 1391 is one of the most hotly disputed questions among historians. The dilemma begins with the fact that general demographic data on such distant epochs are in any case highly variable and imprecise. There is a tendency among modern scholars to correct the figures of older publications downwards (see in detail Kamen, 'The Mediterranean and the Expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492', p. 44). The high estimates in the older literature often originated in the fact that local events were transferred *pars pro toto* to the whole country, as Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, vividly demonstrates. Additionally, earlier authors adopted figures with symbolic value from Jewish chronicles as statistics without checking them against other sources.

Both among refugees and conversos there were many members of the economic and intellectual elite. The Jewish scholars who left Spain to evade baptism now had to clarify how to deal with these masses of converts. Were they still Israel? Would they return to Judaism or were they lost to the Jewish community forever? And how could the inhabitants of the former Jewish neighbourhoods be kept apart? Who among them was really baptized — and who was not? As in the halakhic positions before 1391, two different fractions emerged in the further development of Jewish law after this crisis.

The opinions of the scholars who had already fled from Spain to North Africa in 1391³⁵ oscillated between the position of Rashi and that of Maimonides: a forcibly baptized person was still an Israelite — but he would have to display the required behaviour and go into exile as soon as possible. At the beginning of their work, some Maghrebi scholars placed great expectations on the return of the conversos to Israel and built golden bridges for the supposed returnees. Over time, however, they were regularly disappointed and tightened the halacha again: the *anüssim* became *meshumadim*.³⁶

Those Jewish scholars who had bravely resisted the compulsion to convert in Spain and Portugal until 1492 took a far more critical stance towards the conversos than their colleagues who had previously fled. They who had been able to observe their former neighbours at close quarters in many places abandoned them: they regarded them as apostates and pagans; they considered it appropriate to draw a sharp line between leavers and remainers. Due to his shared fate with the latter scholars, it can be assumed that Abraham ben Torrutiel thought and felt similarly. For ben Torrutiel, who had fled to Fez with his father under dramatic circumstances, conversion could not have been acceptable. In the third part of his chronicle, where he talks about the expulsion of the Jews of Spain and Portugal, Abraham expresses himself as follows:

In the year 252 [1492] [came] the wrath of the Eternal upon his people, and he was eagerly considering the evil that was brought upon us. For the Eternal our God is just: he did not do to us according to what we had sinned, nor according to our offences did he recompense us. For our offences were many, higher and greater than the heavens. [...] And almost greater than this was the forgetfulness of Torah from Israel, as well as the wisdom of the outsiders [books]. [...] Nor were they strengthened in the Oral Torah, except the poor and the wretched. Then the wrath of the Eternal One was kindled and he expelled them from the province of Castiliah through King Don Hernando. But it was the advice of his

35 Above all Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet (Ribash, 1326–1408) and Simon ben Zemach Duran (Rashbaz, 1361–1444). The Ribash fled Valencia in 1391 and became the chief rabbi of Algiers. The Rashbaz had also left Spain in 1391 and became his successor. He founded an important dynasty of scholars, the first of whom, his son Solomon Duran (Rashbash; c. 1400–1467), was already dealing with the third generation of conversos.

36 See Isaac ben Sheshet, *Responsa* § 4 vs. § 171.

wife, the cursed one. She is Jezebel, the wicked one, and the saying was her advice.³⁷ [...] ³⁸ But most of the Jews and their great men and their judges remained in their homes and apostatised (והמירו דתם) from their religion in favour of a religion of a foreign god of the land. And they forsook the 'fount of living waters' [Jer. 17. 13] and the King of the world, and 'they turned to the service of other gods [and worshiped them], gods, whom they had not experienced and whom He had not allotted to them' [Deuteronomy 29. 25]; 'wood and stone', which do no harm and do no destruction [Deuteronomy 4. 28] and do no good. And at their head of the multitude of apostates³⁹ the Rav Don Abraham Shneur, the Rav of the congregation of Spain, he and his sons⁴⁰ and all who were his. And like these, thousands and tens of thousands were blotted out of the Book of Life [Psalms 59. 29], for they sinned and caused the many to sin. For the eyes of the many are upon them, and therefore the sin of the many is upon them. But of the great men of Spain and of their leaders none went out, except a few men who sought to die for the saints of the name. And they made themselves ownerless, whether for death or for punishment.⁴¹

The author's deep concern about the events at the end of the fifteenth century speaks volumes in this report. There can be no doubt (also because of ben Torrutiel's personal fate) that the question of loyalty to Jewish tradition was paramount for him. In view of the massive failure of the Spanish-Jewish ruling elite, as emphasized by the chronicler with the example of Abraham Seneor, it is important to consider another facet of Rabbi Nathanael's story.

Preliminary Conclusion

The numerous points of contact between our short story and the biblical, New Testament, and rabbinical subtexts point to an elaborate narrative that deals with a threat to Jewish identity (cf. bEruvin 69; John 1. 45–51). At the same time, both the location of the episode about Rabbi Nathanael within the chronicle and the life of its author (France in the fourteenth century; Spain at the end of the sixteenth century) point to severe persecutions of

37 The identification of Jezebel (1 Kings 16, 18, 19, 21 and others) with Queen Isabella I (1451–1504) of Castile was somewhat obvious.

38 There follows a list of the countries of exile, a description of the expulsion from Portugal and an interpretation of the events using quotations from Ezekiel and Isaiah.

39 אפיקורסים.

40 Don Abraham Seneor (1412–1493) was the last crown rabbi of Castile. He came from a family of important tax tenants and courtiers. After 1492, Seneor and his entire family preferred conversion to leaving the country. His baptism was carefully orchestrated, as it was (rightly) assumed that it would have a great influence on other Jews.

41 David, 'Two Chronicles', pp. 36–38.

the Jewish community and its scholars as a historical context for the writing of ben Torrutiel's account.

The Rabbi Nathanael in our story is an undisputed leader. He is a 'great one in the Torah and in miracles'. Wrapped in his tallit, he 'resembles an angel'. What if he — like many of the important Sephardic scholars in exile — despaired of his people? Nathanael interprets the 'forgetting of the ring' almost immediately as theft: the traditions of the forefathers are gone. Cursed be he who took them! Consequently, the fig tree of Israel withers. The scholar has given up on his own people, albeit by cryptic means. According to this reading, Rabbi Nathanael would not be the apostate — the people are seen as withered and corrupt. However, shortly before the ultimate catastrophe - the cutting down of the tree - the ring is found again. It is found where it was not expected, but where Rabbi Nathanael himself had placed it: in the fig tree. The scholar takes the piece of jewellery back and the tree blossoms again.

In this interpretation, the episode of Rabbi Nathanael, the curser of the fig tree, would be a kind of leadership story. The hope that shimmers unmistakably through the few lines is directed inwards: as long as the scholars fulfil their responsibility, do not leave their traditions lying around somewhere but carry them and display them, there will be hope for the fig tree Israel. This Rabbi Nathanael also contrasts with the New Testament Gospels' 'true Israelite', who jumps ship at the first opportunity. Although Rabbi Nathanael is not characterized by particularly intensive searching, he at least grants his withered tree the necessary respite. With all the hermeneutic caution that must be exercised with legends, it seems as if this short story has great metaphorical potential. However, the few lines have been subjected to a heavy burden of meaning, a burden that is perhaps too great, given the historical background, the history of confusing identities, and the desperate search for clarity and belonging.

It seems as if these metaphors can only reflect all the contradictions and inconsistencies that resulted from conversion and reconversion, mass flight, expulsion, suspicion and persecution in a fragmented way: why does Nathanael only put his ring in the tree on this Shabbat if he was doing 'as he always did'? Why does it take him a whole day to realize his loss? Can taking the ring off even be interpreted as turning away from one's own tradition? Perhaps we have to be content with the realization that the ruptures in the legend depict precisely the ruptures in Jewish identity that have had to be overcome since the mass conversions of the fourteenth century. In order to help make sense of those fractures, the author adapted stories about a previous parting of the ways, and put them to new kinds of work.

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