THE MAASSEHBUCH AND THE BRANTSPIEGEL

By

M. GASTER

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A careful study of the literary life of any nation leads to a most surprising result. There seems to be no book which, as it were, would be quite a new and independent production, and the more one studies the literary currents of the time, the more one realises an inner connection between one book and the other. One can trace an almost interminable chain although in not a few occasions the intermediary links seem to be broken or to be missing. And yet such connections cannot be denied. Often the authors are unconscious of the fact that they are acting upon a common impulse. There may not be a direct contact or an immediate dependance of one author upon the other but one can easily observe that at a given time the very same problem is discussed by authors of various shades and various characters. This is true of all the literatures, the Jewish not excepted and when it is the question of a popular literature, that which affects the masses, this fact stands out boldly. The material is one which belongs, as it were, to the whole nation or to the whole world, it is anonymus and none can claim the exclusive right of property. It is like flowers which grow in the open field and everyone who passes by feels himself free to pluck them or to take them up and plant them in his own garden. To trace these flowers back to their original field and to study the manner of their transplantation is the special charm of the comparative study of Folklore in general and of tales in particular.

In our Jewish literature such borrowing and changing, planting and replanting has been a constant practice throughout the ages. A glance at our Midrash or rather Aggadic literature suffices to show that this process has been going on from century to century. Not a few of the tales and legends, e. g., found in my collection *The Exempla of the Rabbis* have been shown to have found their place in a vast number of other Jewish works. And not only have they been incorporated into various Midrashim and other works of the Jewish literature but they found their way also to the Arabic literature and to a very large extent into the European literature. Nor have they remained always in the Hebrew language, but just as they were translated into Arabic and European languages they were also translated into the vernacular

German. The most complete collection of this kind is, as is now well-known, the *Maassehbuch*, written in the German of the 17th century, an English translation of which carried out by me has recently appeared among the publications of the Jewish Publication Society of America (1934). In a brief introduction I have endeavoured to trace the history of such collections and in the notes references have been given to my "Exempla" and other sources and parallels. So far so good, as to the literary origin although the question may have been left open as to whether a similar compilation and of the same extent had been in existence before the year 1602 when that book appeared in Bâle. By the way, I may mention [illegible] id-
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If such be the case, and undoubtedly it is so, then we must look out and see whether we can find at that time a similar current to have set in. The Maassehbuch would then be taken out of its isolation and a psychological reason would have been found for its appearance. Had the people been prepared for it by another book of the same kind or did the Maassehbuch give an impulse for such another publication? The answer may be that it was so but to a limited extent and then in

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With Dr.M.Gaster's compliments.

German. The most complete collection of this kind is, as is now well-known, the *Maassehbuch*, written in the German of the 17th century, an English translation of which carried out by me has recently appeared among the publications of the Jewish Publication Society of America (1934). In a brief introduction I have endeavoured to trace the history of such collections and in the notes references have been given to my "Exempla" and other sources and parallels. So far so good, as to the literary origin although the question may have been left open as to whether a similar compilation and of the same extent had been in existence before the year 1602 when that book appeared in Bâle. By the way, I may mention that I have discovered in a Yiddish MS in Oxford of the 15th century, the very remarkable story of the Rabbi changed into a werewolf by means of a magic ring. It is absolutely identical with No. 228 in the Maassehbuch, page 576. It is clear that the compiler of the Maassehbuch must have had a number of ancient MSS containing some of the tales included in his book. Prof. A. H. Krappe has published in the *Speculum* of 1933, p. 209 a long study on such tales under the title Arthur and Gorlagon. He did not know of this Yiddish Parallel in the Maassehbuch and, of course not, the more ancient MS version of the 15th century. It might have affected the conclusions to which he had arrived.

But returning to our subject after this digression. The real object of that compilation has certainly been to inculcate moral teachings by way of examples and stories. Yet although it may have been a question of giving entertainment, but there was no doubt an ethical motive behind it. Once we realise this, the Maassehbuch in spite of its title at once ranges itself besides the so-called Musarbooks, books intended to be guides for the moral and religious life of the Jews and, above all, for the Jewesses. Such books, written in Hebrew, abound in our Jewish literature. But if the Jewess was to be taught, such books had to be written in the vernacular, in the language best understood by the Jewess, who was not expected to be a Hebrew scholar. It appealed at the same time to the larger mass of the people, also more conversant with the vernacular, i. e., German, than with the Hebrew language.

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Hebrew. It seems that besides Prag Bâle was at that time the centre of Hebrew printing and in this connection the appearance of two works in Hebrew had stimulated the publication of other works in the Jewish-German dialect. I am referring here to the great ethical work of Rabbi Juda the Hasid (the pious one) known as the *Sefer Hasidim*, a book full of ethical principles and morals, and also not without a few legends and stories which made an impression upon the simple mind of the people. That book had become ever since one of the most popular books and has been reprinted very many times. It was printed in Bâle in 1580.

The next book to be mentioned is that of Jakob Luzzatto, *Kaftor va-Ferah*, which appeared also in Bâle in 1580, a book full of legends and tales. To a certain extent as shown in the introduction to my translation of the Maassehbuch, they have exercised an influence upon the author of the last mentioned compilation. A number of tales and legends were taken from them and incorporated into the Maassehbuch. I lay special stress upon this fact since it may bear on the problem which I intend discussing here. At that time there appeared in Bâle in the year 1602, the very year of the printing of the Maassehbuch a small booklet in rhymes, called *Sefer Miswot Hanashim* in Jewish-German in 139 very short chapters; the author, whom J. Fuerst in his *Bibliotheca Judaica*, I, 49 calls Binj. Ardonno, deals with the three principle commands affecting Jewish women. According to Fuerst, that booklet had been printed in Venice in 1552. M. Gruenbaum in his *Juedisch Deutsche Chrestomathie* p. 265 gives a short description of the book and also some abstracts of the contents, but he declares the book to be anonymous and he does not know the Venice edition. Be it as it may, the fact remains that the booklet was printed or reprinted in Bâle in 1602. This book belongs to the class of the Musar literature, intended to inculcate ethical principles and to be a special guide to Jewish women in the exercise of their religious practices. In the same year and by the same printer there appeared a book, almost as important, and perhaps more than the Maassehbuch, and which has often been reprinted. It calls itself *Brantspiegel*. Before I discuss the title and the contents, it is necessary to elucidate as far as possible the claim which has been made for Moses Henochs of Jerusalem to be the author. If the date given by Fuerst and others that the first edition had appeared in Prague in 1572 be correct, it would be almost a literary miracle if Moses Henoch would have compiled it. He died in the year 1643, and thus 71 years had elapsed since the book had been printed. The author of the book shows himself to have been a great talmudic scholar, fully versed in the rabbinic liter-

ature, a man who had great experience of the world and in a position which justified him in his mind to be a teacher and guide to the people to lay down moral laws and to exemplify them by constant reference to ancient stories and legends. Such a man must have been at least 30 years old and if the date of the edition is correct, then Henochs must have been at least 100 years old when he died. Hitherto, however, no one has seen this edition[1] and if Moses Henochs be really the author then the edition which appeared in 1602 in Bâle is indeed the Ed. Princeps. It is so designated also by Cowley in the Catalogue of the Bodleian Library. This edition has become almost as scarce as the first edition of the Maassehbuch. From 1602 to 1706 the book has been reprinted no less than 7 times. 1706 seems to be the last edition. Gruenbaum in his "Chresthomathie" used this last edition, he does not seem to know any of the earlier, they were evidently inaccessible. Of the first edition I believe it is only the Bodleian that has a copy, and none, as far as I am aware, is in the British Museum. I possess an incomplete copy of the first edition and a perfect and somewhat curious copy of the Frankfurt edition of 1706, the first and the last. The curious part about it is, that it has two titlepages, one unfortunately to some extent torn away and the other perfect. The wording is in both the same, whilst the type is slightly different. The copy used by Gruenbaum has the Chronogram יִתְּנוּ whilst my copy has an entirely different one, i. e., the word תסג which is taken from the verse in Dt. 19.14, but the word is written defective, with the omission of the י, the first part of the verse being printed in full. There can be no mistake about it and this would make my copy being printed in 1703, an edition which has been entirely unknown. Moreover, according to the practice of some printers who wish to palm off their wares on the unsuspecting purchaser as if the books they offered for sale have been printed in Amsterdam, here also we find on the titlepage printed in large letters the word Amsterdam and above it, as usual, in very small letters the word meaning "with the type of" (beotiyot) and again under the word Amsterdam, with a very small type "Frankfurt de Main" and underneath the above mentioned verse with the date, the latter being printed with large type and with two strokes between the last two letters. This may seem quite a small and petty detail, but there seems to be so much confusion about the dates that attention must be drawn even to small details, if at any time we may hope to get a reliable bibliography. So, in our case, Zedner has an edition Frankfurt 1676, whilst Fuerst knows

[1] [Compare, however, Steinschneider, *C. B.* col. 1824.]

only one of 1680 and so on. To return now to our subject. The anonymous author explains the remarkable title which he has given to this book on the Hebrew portion of the titlepage as being a book filled with the holy flame of the teaching of our sages in which the people could see themselves reflected and taught manners and faith. The Hebrew title *Mareh Hasorefet* appears for the first time in the Frankfurt edition of 1706. In the Jewish-German introduction he explains the title to mean a mirror which is always clean and polished, in which they could see equally clean all the laws and precepts for an upright, honest, true and virtuous Jewish life. The book is divided into 74 chapters and a large number of these are addressed to the women. The book is to be principally of use to women and to those among men who are unable to read the sacred tongue. A few headings will suffice to show the character of the book, I am taking them at random: Ch. 3: The superiority of man by his power of speech. Ch. 5: On the difference between a good and a bad woman. Ch. 9: On the influence of a pious woman on a pious man. Ch. 15: How women have to behave in their homes. Ch. 20: The man is to avoid making enemies. Ch. 23: Man should be satisfied with whatever God gives. Ch. 31: A man's duties towards father and mother. Ch. 35: On decency. Ch. 41: On table-manners. Ch. 50: Not to be a flatterer. Ch. 54: Not to tell lies. There are also chapters on modesty, honesty, proper performing of religious duty, on false pride and so on throughout the whole gamut of Jewish religious life. A series of wholesome lessons written in that simple style characteristic of the Yiddish literature. The author, however, introduces into his teaching a series of tales in order to illustrate and exemplify by these stories the lessons which he wishes to convey. It is the old practice followed by Jew and non-Jew alike throughout the ages down to our very own days. No preacher or Maggid could easily dispense with them. They appeal to the people direct and bring the lesson more aptly and more strongly home than the words of the preacher. Leaving the number of parabels (mashal) aside, there are, in this Brantspiegel no less than 88 stories. Comparing them now with the Maassehbuch in order to ascertain whether there is any connection between the two, I find in the Brantspiegel no less than 33 or even 34 stories which both have in common. If we take out of the Maassehbuch the whole cycle about Rabbi Judah the Hasid, Rabbi Samuel, the stories about the German Rabbis, Amnon, Meir, etc., and those of more or less local German origin like the story of the werewolf of which there is no trace in the Brantspiegel, the similarity grows closer. Both are also making use of Luzzatto's work, two or three of the stories found in the Maassehbuch are also found in the

Brantspiegel, so e. g., the story in the Maassehbuch No. 250 of the wicked king who beguiled the sages of Israel to drink wine and then in their drunkenness to eat forbidden food and to commit fornication with strange women, or No. 240, the robber who undertook to speak the truth. By the way, the use made by the author of the Brantspiegel, of the work of Luzzatto, which appeared for the first time in 1580 in Bâle, precludes the possibility of the existence of an edition anterior to that date, i. e., 1577, alleged by Steinschneider and Fuerst. The author of the Brantspiegel could not have used a book which was not in existence. From the above mentioned comparison it is evident that both men, the author of the Maassehbuch as well as that of the Brantspiegel must have been working at the same time and under the same influences. Now, who was the first in the field? It is a somewhat difficult question to answer, since no reference could be found in either of them to the work of the other. We can only be guided by internal evidence. Both intended to serve one and the same purpose. One more explicit, using the rabbinical literature with its legends and tales as the basis for ethical teaching. The other, on the contrary, used the material chiefly for pleasure and entertaining, leaving it to the reader, to draw his own conclusions if he so chooses, or is capable enough to do it. The latter follows the example of the older Hebrew compilation, the collections of the Aggadot and Midrashim, such as enumerated in my introduction to the Maassehbuch and in my "Exempla of the Rabbis." In the Midrash of the ten commandments which both are using, true enough, the stories are already practical illustrations of the commandments. In the Maassehbuch they are simply reproduced such as they are found in the original with occasional additions at the end of a brief "moralisation," a brief moral injunction, drawn from the preceding story. Not so in the Brantspiegel. Here, the chief aim and object is not merely to entertain or to take the place of other German stories which enjoyed popularity among the Jews as the author of the Maassehbuch proclaims it to be his aim, but to give to the people a complete guide for a pure and truly religious Jewish life. The stories are mere illustrations. They are introduced only to strengthen the value of the lesson. In consequence they are also differently treated. With but a very few exceptions they are much shorter than in the Maassehbuch and more to the point. They have been worked over very deftly, they bring home to the reader the moral and practical value of these tales and do not expect him to draw his own conclusions and apply them in a proper way. The other stories which he has not in common with the Maassehbuch he has drawn also

from the same Hebrew sources. It proves that he must have worked independently of the Maassehbuch, otherwise it would have been very easy for him to draw the entire material which he required from this work. He tells the Tobit story and combines it with one of the Sefer Maasiot and I believe he also had access to the Sefer Hasidim, at any rate, in the story of the man who studied only the treatise Hagiga. As already remarked above, not a single German story or referring to rabbis in Germany is found in the Brantspiegel. If the book is really the work of Moses Henochs who calls himself Jerushalmi, a Jerusalemitan, it is obvious that although he writes excellent Yiddish that he is unacquainted with anything affecting the rabbis of Germany or is ignorant of any legend concerning them and still more that he does not know any German popular tale. And yet, one cannot deny the close parallelism between the Brantspiegel and the Maassehbuch. They both worked under the same influences. A current had set in which demanded a popular literature in the vernacular. May be, that books of a similar kind were then circulating among the non-Jews, like the *Schatzkästlein*, the German *Gesta Romanorum*, *Seelenspiegel* and other books of a similar edifying character filled with legends and tales. It would lead me too far were I here to attempt even remotely to refer to the vast literature of a similar character which appeared in Germany in the 16th century and enjoyed a great popularity, such as Johannes Pauli, *Schimpf und Ernst*, Geiler's *Narrenschiff*, and a large number of anecdotes and tales. Such a study must be left to other times and perhaps to other hands. One thing is certain: nowhere and at no time did the Jews live in air-tight compartments. Happily the spirit knows no boundaries and Jews were also receptive to influences from without. Be it as it may, judging from the spirit of the time, my own impression is, that whilst the two books appeared at the same place and in the same year 1602 in Bâle and by the same printer, the priority seems to belong to the author of the Brantspiegel who follows in the footsteps of his forbears and prepared like them also a Musarbook but now in Yiddish. May be, through his impulse the compiler of the Maassehbuch was urged to prepare his book of tales. Both satisfied temporary wishes, but whilst the Maassehbuch remained apparently without a further influence upon the succeeding Yiddish literature, except that it appeared slightly enlarged in Frankfurt 1703 the example set by the Brantspiegel was taken up by Isaak b. Eljakim in his Leb tob; the first edition appeared in Prague in 1620 and has since been reprinted no less than 23 times up to the year 1805 and Hendel Kirchhan published his *Simhat Hanefesh* in Frankfurt a. Main

in 1707, a book of a similar ethical character, full of stories and parables. It is noteworthy that Theodor Benfey in his famous introduction to the *Pantschatantra* often refers to this book. It has also been reprinted over and over again.

In between these two publications there appeared another one which has evidently caused great confusion. In Fuerst's "Bibliotheca Judaica" the Brantspiegel is quoted under the heading *Mareh Musar.* This title does not apply to any of the editions and the Hebrew title of Mareh Hasorefet occurs for the first time only on the Frankfurt edition of 1703 (1706). It has been added no doubt by the printer. Another book, however, which is the work of a certain Seligmann Ulma Guenzberg appeared 1678 in Prague, then twice in Frankfurt in 1680 (1691), in Offenbach 1716, Sulzbach, ca. 1750. The Yiddish title is *Zuchtspiegel.* The author has probably been influenced by the title "Brantspiegel" to give to his own book the title "Zuchtspiegel," it differs however considerably from the former since it is merely a collection of ethical maxims, first given in Hebrew and then commented upon in Yiddish. The author writes this commentary in rhymes and here and there a few stories are interspersed. The apparent similarity of the title has misled Fuerst to such an extent that the real book as well as the name of Seligmann Ulma has been omitted by him and he has given the wrong title to the "Brantspiegel."

Not without significance is again the fact that owing to the same current the following books appeared almost simultaneously in Frankfurt a. Main: 1703 Maassehbuch, Brantspiegel 1703 (1706), Simhat Hanefesh 1707, not to speak of other books of Yiddish literature which do not come within the compass of this investigation. 1805, the year in which the last edition of Simhat Hanefesh appeared marks the date when this Yiddish literature practically died in Germany. The "pure German" movement started by Mendelssohn killed it outright in its ancient home, Germany. How far it may have contributed to enrich the poetry and to deepen the religious life of the Jewish women can only be ascertained by a far wider enquiry than the present. How much of it has got into the *Tseena u-reena* and other books of similar character would also come within the purview of such an inquiry. The popular hasidic literature would also have to be considered, enough for the day the Maassehbuch and the Brantspiegel.

I have selected this short study of the relation between two of the most prominent books of the Yiddish literature as my contribution to the "George Alexander Kohut Memorial Volume". I have plucked two flowers growing wild in the field of Jewish literature to lay them

as a tribute on the grave of a man who had evinced a keen interest in a literature which he realised as an important chapter in the history of Jewish civilisation and culture intended not only to preserve for the Jewish womanhood that unique privilege they enjoyed of being the embodiment of King Solomon's praise, but also to uplift the masses and to show to them like in a mirror the greatness and beauty of the past and to help them to live a life of dignity and modesty in accordance with the Jewish ideals.