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Conflicting Promises in the Book of Joshua and Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale"

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Chaucer's handling of promises in "The Franklin's Tale" has often seemed implausible to modern readers. Many critics have focused on Dorigen's rash promise. The fact that she promises "in pley" (line 988) to love the squire Aurelius makes the rest of the story hard to believe. Why would he take the joke seriously when he knows she intends to reject him? Why would she feel compelled to honor a joke, and why would her husband, Arveragus, agree? His agreement is especially problematic because he seems to disregard a conflict between promises: before Dorigen promises to love the squire "best of any man" (997), she promises Arveragus: "Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf – /Have heer my trouthe – til that myn herte breste" (758–59). In this tale, to love a man apparently means to have sex with him, so she cannot fulfill her promise to the squire and remain a "trewe wyf." As one critic puts it, "Dorigen is in a double bind" (Pitcher 78). Alan T. Gaylord finds the characters' strange attitude toward promising ironic; he argues that Chaucer's purpose is to criticize the narrator's worldview, which would have seemed as absurd to educated medieval readers as it does to ordinary readers today (365). Aligning Dorigen's rash promise with Biblical promises made by Herod and Jephthah, Gaylord concludes: "if one goes to moral treatises, the preachers, the teachers, and the law-givers, one finds them not only saying the same things but more often than not using each other's words and examples. Most simply stated, the counsel amounts to this: *rash promises are not to be kept*" (352). Yet the Bible contains another story about promises, and Chaucerians seem to have overlooked the relevance of this story to "The Franklin's Tale."

According to the Bible, God commanded the Israelites to kill all the nations residing in Canaan: "thou shalt utterly destroy them. Thou shalt make no league with them nor shew mercy to them" (Edgar and Kinney, Deut. 7.1–2).¹ This command is part of the covenant God makes with the Israelites: "Keep therefore the precepts and ceremonies and judgments which I command thee this day to do" (Deut. 7.11). Moses convenes the Israelites "that thou mayst pass in the covenant of the Lord, thy God, and in the oath which this day the Lord, thy God, maketh with thee" (Deut. 29.12). Moses took "the book of the covenant" and "read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, 'All things that the Lord hath spoken we will do; we will be obedient'" (Exod. 24.7). After crossing the Jordan, Joshua "read all the words of the blessing and the cursing and all things that were written in the book of the law. He left out nothing of those things which Moses had commanded" (Josh. 8.34–35). The very next chapter tells a story about one of the nations the covenant requires Joshua to wipe out. The Gibeonites, a faction of the Hivites (Josh. 11.19), deceive Joshua by pretending to be newcomers to Canaan; wearing old clothes and shoes and carrying old provisions, they dissimulate their identity (Josh. 9.4–5). Believing the lie that they have just come "from a very far country" (Josh. 9.9), "Joshua made peace with them and entering into a league promised that they should not be slain; the princes also of the multitude swore to them" (Josh. 9.15). According to Christoph Berner, "the peculiar narrative plot of Josh 9 can only be explained against the background of the laws of Deuteronomy" (254). When the Israelites find out that the Gibeonites had tricked them, the discrepancy between the covenant with God and the league entered into with the strangers does not pass unnoticed: "all the common people murmured against the princes" (Josh. 9.18).²

Just as one would expect Dorigen's promise to her husband to override her subsequent playful promise to a wannabe adulterer, so one would expect the Israelites' covenant with God to override a promise given to the deceptive Gibeonites. Defying this expectation, Joshua and the princes honor their promise to the strangers: "We have sworn to them in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, and therefore we may not touch them. But this we will do to them: let their lives be saved lest the wrath of the Lord be stirred up against us if we should be forsworn" (Josh. 9.19–20). Joshua continues to honor his oath even after the Gibeonites confess to lying (Josh. 9.26). God (like Arveragus) approves of the Israelites' violation of their first oath to him; indeed, when Joshua comes to the defense of the Gibeonites, God grants him victory over their enemies (Josh. 10.8–11). If Joshua's promise to the Gibeonites is rash, God wants him to keep it anyway.

One of the sources of "The Franklin's Tale," Jerome's "Against Jovinianus," mentions the Gibeonites, though it does not discuss the conflict of promises (345). Augustine's commentary on Joshua 9 is more illuminating. He argues that the Israelites were correct to privilege their oath to the Gibeonites:

because the oath was kept thus, albeit in regard to men who lied, so that [the Israelites'] judgment was inclined toward clemency, it did not displease God. For if, on the contrary, they had sworn that they were going to kill some people who they had thought were Gibeonites living in the Promised Land, and afterwards they had learned that they were foreigners in that land and had come to them from afar, it would certainly not be thought that they would have wiped them out in order to fulfill an oath. Because of that forbearing clemency, holy David, even after the words by which he had sworn he would kill Nabal, preferred to spare the one whom he was going to kill. He thought that not fulfilling an oath in a rather difficult matter would please God more if he did not do what he had sworn [to do] when stirred by anger than if he carried it out. (364–65)

The *Glossa Ordinaria*, "the most widely used aid for interpreting the Bible in the later Middle Ages" (Besserman 139), cites this passage (Migne 513). Augustine understands that the Israelites have made conflicting oaths, one to God and one to the Gibeonites. But this does not result in "a double bind." Unlike the murmuring Israelites, Augustine defends Joshua's choice. The covenant requires Joshua to kill the Gibeonites; David's oath requires him to kill Nabal. Both men obtain God's favor despite the fact that they violate one of their oaths. Augustine's hypothetical scenario indicates that public appearance is a significant consideration here: had the Israelites mistakenly slaughtered a group of non-Canaanites, "it would certainly not be thought" that this bloodshed was an attempt to fulfill a promise to God – even though there was such a promise, since the covenant demands the killing of all the Canaanites. Anyone besides the Israelites would no doubt have regarded the slaughter as a self-interested or merely cruel act.

Augustine's remarks perhaps make Chaucer's concern with appearance, with how things look to outsiders, less idiosyncratic. It is fitting that the Gibeonites, like Aurelius and his hired magician, are manipulators of appearance. The naivete of Dorigen and her husband, who famously neglect to see whether the rocks have actually disappeared, also resembles the gullibility of Joshua. Commenting on the story of the Gibeonites, Ambrose claims: "So sacred was one's plighted word held in those days that no one would believe that others could try to deceive." He does not explain how it was possible for the Gibeonites to practice what no one else could believe, but the story's juxtaposition of trickery and credulity resembles what occurs in "The Franklin's Tale."

Moreover, God's covenant with the Israelites resembles the marital oaths exchanged by Dorigen and Arveragus. The prophetic books of the Bible repeatedly liken the covenant to a marriage; God is the husband, Israel the wife.³ The Gibeonites prompt both the Israelites and God to suspend some their promises: the Israelites suspend their genocidal promise to God in order to keep their promise to the strangers; God suspends his promise utterly to destroy the Canaanites and allows his chosen people to keep their second promise. Joshua 9 reveals how a medieval audience could have enjoyed "The Franklin's Tale" without thinking that its characters were caught in an absurd or aporetic situation. When two promises conflict, Arveragus and Dorigen (like God and the Israelites) temporarily relax their mutual promises in order to keep a promise to an outsider (the Gibeonites or Aurelius). This generosity chimes with one of the keywords of Chaucer's tale: *fre*. Dorigen's "not fulfilling" of her marital oath to Arveragus is surely "more difficult" for her than fulfilling it would have been; indeed, the prospect of infidelity

makes her consider suicide (1355–1456). By tarrying with the difficulty, Dorigen shows a kind of Augustinian virtue. Augustine would have no doubt disapproved of her adultery, but she never actually commits it, let alone desires it. She earns the moral distinction of keeping her promise to the squire, which is difficult (among other reasons) because it seems to entail the breaking of her promise to her husband. But while Joshua actually spares the Gibeonites, breaking his first promise, Dorigen, spared by the happy ending, avoids breaking her first promise, so she never – as a medieval misogynist might have it – defiles herself with extra-marital sex. When Dorigen gives her promise “in pley,” she almost certainly intends to reject Aurelius: she believes removing the rocks is impossible (1001). When it turns out that it is possible, she does not invoke her previous misunderstanding to wriggle out of the promise. In this respect, she is like Joshua, who does not invoke his misunderstanding of the identity of the Gibeonites to void his promise to them. As Joshua and God, in Augustine’s reading, grant the Gibeonites “clemency,” so Dorigen and Arveragus grant Aurelius clemency, offering to assuage his erotic suffering.⁴

Chaucer nowhere mentions the Gibeonites, and it would be rash to conclude that he had them consciously in mind when adapting his sources. Joshua 9 is not a popular Biblical anecdote, and even the relatively obscure story of Jephthah seems to have exerted a greater influence on the imagination of Chaucer and his contemporaries. But both Joshua 9 and Augustine’s commentary suggest how premodern audiences might have finessed promissory contradictions in narratives like “The Franklin’s Tale.”

Notes

1. We quote the Douay-Rheims translation provided in Edgar and Kinney’s edition of *The Vulgate Bible*.
2. The Latin text uses the same word, *foedus*, to designate the covenant and the league (Edgar and Kinney 1:402-03, 1:1034-35, 2a:46-47).
3. See, for example, Jer. 3.1 and 3.14. Though it may seem outlandish to identify a husband’s authority with God’s, Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale” explores the disturbing possibilities of this metaphor.
4. Agreeing that it is impossible to remove the rocks, Aurelius says: “Thanne moot I dye of sodeyn deth horrible” (1010), and he languishes in bed for more than two years (1101-3). It is not certain that Chaucer’s depiction of this suffering is intentionally ironic. Less frivolous characters, such as Arcite and Troilus, undergo similar ordeals. Aurelius, like the Gibeonites, resorts to trickery to save his life.

Disclosure statement

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