Der wahre Jakob

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INNUMERABLE EXAMPLES for the use of names in proverbs and proverbial phrases are easily gathered, yet in most instances little or no significance can be attached to such usage of specific names. The relative proverbial occurrence of common names like Jack or Mary, John or Henry usually constitutes merely a supplementary proof of the historical or regional popularity of these names. In contrast to this use of names in a general, unclassified sense, we may regard the use of a name as meaningful in the context of a proverb if it enhances the content of the proverb by a specific allusion to a definite historical or legendary personality, e.g., the allusion to the name of Methuselah in the proverbial comparison *as old as Methuselah* becomes meaningful only through our familiarity with the Biblical connotations which are implied by this name.

Occasionally the awareness of the original significance of the name is lost in the course of time although the proverbial use of the saying in its original or perhaps some transferred sense will persist. In these instances our success in tracing the proverbial use of a name to a definite personal allusion may throw light on the original of a well-known proverb.

The German proverbial saying *das ist der wahre Jakob* (this is the real Jacob) is but one of numerous interesting proverbs in which the original reference to a name has become controversial or completely unintelligible. The saying is widely current in North and West Germany in the sense of "this is the real thing (or man)"[1] and undoubtedly set the pattern for the Swabian variant *das ist der alte Jakob* (this is the same old humdrum).[2] An investigation of the origin of this proverbial expression seems attractive not only because hardly any evidence has been offered to substantiate sundry explanations of the original allusion but also in view of the striking

similarity of pattern and identity of meaning with our well-known saying *this is the real McCoy.*

One surmise sees in the saying an allusion to the Biblical account about Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac (*Gen.* xxvii).[3] This explanation seems rather incongruous in the light of the Biblical narrative which relates that it was Jacob who secured his father's blessing in the disguise of his brother. To make sense we should have to substitute Esau's name for Jacob's and there is no evidence to support the assumption that the original saying had actually been *das ist nicht der wahre Esau* (this is not the real Esau). The absence of a French equivalent eliminates another conjecture which presumes a possible allusion to Jacques Bonhomme, the leader of the French peasant revolt in 1358.[4] More convincing support can be found for a third explanation which links our saying to the Biblical name of Jacob, the son of Zebedee and brother of St. John.[5] St. Jacob, the first apostolic martyr and patron saint of Spain, was one of the most highly venerated saints of the medieval Church. According to an old and firmly established tradition his relics were miraculously transported to Spain where he supposedly had preached the gospel before he was put to death in Judea. His shrine in Compostella became during the Middle Ages one of the most sacred places of pilgrimage which by virtue of countless miracles ranked next to Jerusalem and Rome in fame and popularity. From the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries we have accounts of some years in which more than 100,000 pilgrims from all parts of Europe visited Compostella. Wearing "Jacob's shell," the emblem of their patron saint, on their coasts or pilgrim hats, they formed lay orders in many countries and perpetuated the glory of St. Jacob in numerous songs and legends about his divine powers and miraculous cures.[6]

Proverbial references to the traditional garb of these pilgrims who in Germany called themselves *Jakobsbrüder* have been recorded since the close of the Middle Ages. The seventeenth century proverb *offtermal ist ein Ding beigeflickt, wie ein Muschel auf eim Jacobsmantel*[7] (a thing is often clumsily patched on like a shell on Jacob's coat) is still current in the variant *er ist beklekst, wie ein Jakobsbruder mit Muscheln*[8] (he is bespattered like a pilgrim of St. Jakob with shells). The memory of the long and often perilous pilgrimage from Germany has been preserved in the phrase *bis zu St. Jacob fahren* (to

travel as far as St. Jacob) which was used in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to allude to a long journey.[9] Various tales about dishonest innkeepers who misused and cheated the poor pilgrims are reflected in the sixteenth century adage *die Welt ist voller schalks- vnnd Jakobswirt*[10] (The world is full of wicked and "Jacob's [i.e., dishonest] innkeepers).

The early and sometimes continuing currency of German proverbial lore, reflecting the cult of St. Jacob, enhances the likelihood of similar allusions in other proverbial references to this name. We know that the early fame of the shrine in Compostella soon inspired numerous other churches and monasteries, notably in France and Italy, to lay claim to the possession of all or at least some of the remains of this popular saint. The ensuing disputes among the pilgrims over the authenticity of these rivaling claims and particularly their indignation over a fraudulous "invention" of the body of St. Jacob in a church on Monte Grigiano in Italy in 1395[11] offer a rather plausible explanation for the manner and approximate time of origin of the saying *das ist der wahre Jakob*. It appears as an expression of their ardent faith in a particular shrine of their patron saint. Even if we find no record of early currency, we may trace this saying through the slender clue of a common name to a long forgotten allusion to the excesses of medieval hagiolatry.

NOTES

[1] Karl Albrecht, *Die Leipziger Mundart* (Leipzig, 1881), p. 39; Hermann von Fischer, ed. *Schwäbisches Wörterbuch* (Tübingen, 1904 ff.), IV, 66; Fritz Hönig, *Sprichwörter und Redensarten in Kölnischer Mundart* (Stuttgart, 1913), p. 79; Karl Müller-Fraureuth, *Wörterbuch der obersächsischen und erzgebirgischen Mundarten* (Dresden, 1908), I, 566; Josef Müller, ed. *Rheinisches Wörterbuch* (Bonn, 1928 ff.), III, 1132; Karl Rother, *Die schlesischen Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (Breslau, 1928), p. 344; K. F. W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörterlexikon* (Leipzig, 1867–80), II, 1001.

[2] Fischer, *loc. cit.*

[3] See Paul Grünberg, *Biblische Redensarten* (Heilbronn, 1888), p. 32 and Josef Reinius, *On Transferred Appellations of Human Beings* (Göteborg, 1903), p. 30.

[4] See Wander, *loc. cit.*

[5] See Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm and others, eds. *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1854 ff.), IV, pt. 2, 2202 and Fischer, *loc. cit.*

[6] In English St. Jacob is better known by the name of St. James the Greater. For detailed accounts of his cult see Hanns Baechtold-Steubli, ed. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927 ff.), IV, 620–623 and Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, new and rev. ed. (Edinburgh, 1914), VIII, 546–553. Karl Euling offers a comprehensive discussion of the sources of a medieval literary treatment of one of the Jacob's legends by Kunz Kistener in *Die Jakobsbrüder von Kunz Kistener*, Germanistische Abhandlungen, No. XVI (Breslau, 1899).

[7] Wander, V, 946.

[8] *Ibid.*, I, 307.

[9] Grimm, *loc. cit.*

[10] Wander, V, 166.

[11] See Baring-Gould, VIII, 551.