The Sacred and the Mundane: Biblical Bread and Priestly Wifehood in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue"

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Abstract: This essay examines the bread imagery used by Alison, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, in her prologue as it relates to her defense of marriage. Drawing from a range of theological ideas about bread and virtue—including those of Alison's primary sources, Saint Jerome and the Apostle Paul—I argue that Alison's view of wifehood as a priestly role is supported by an interpretation of scripture that is both biblically sound and culturally radical.

To understand the significance of the Wife of Bath's theology, it is useful to briefly compare her with the other two female pilgrim-narrators in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400). In his introduction to the *Tales*, John Hirsh writes that "Medieval religious women did not love Christ as a way to power … yet their devout practices could indeed evoke authority, and so influence many about them" (95). The Prioress and the Second Nun are models of this form of pious authority. Their tales and prologues promote the chastity, steadfastness, and innocence exemplified by the Virgin Mary and other female saints. However, Alison pushes back against Hirsh's assessment. As we will see, she draws her authority not from a devout cloistered lifestyle, but rather from a demonstrated understanding of the Bible combined with a worldly background as a married woman. Throughout her protracted prologue, she continually defends the spiritual legitimacy and autonomy of married women. She questions the demonized or idealized female caricatures presented by her fellow pilgrims and offers a

view of marriage and sexuality that is informed by her own lived experience as a five-time wife.

In her prologue, Alison's fundamental argumentative technique is to appropriate and reinterpret the theology of her scholarly male opponents to reinforce the "auctoritee" of her own lived experience (Chaucer 1). Among the most (in)famous of these opponents is Saint Jerome, whose fourth-century satirical treatise *Against Jovinianus* (ca. 393) defends the sanctity of celibacy against the assertion that marriage is equally virtuous. As its title suggests, the treatise responds to a monk named Jovinian, whose "proto-Protestant" and pro-matrimony pamphlet gained him a following in Rome, much to the chagrin of Jerome and his contemporaries in the Church (Smith 3). In his effort to refute Jovinian's claim, Jerome compares virginity to "the finest wheat flour," marriage to barley, and extramarital sexual intercourse to "cow-dung" before asking, "does it follow that the wheat will not have its peculiar purity, because such an [sic] one prefers barley to excrement?" (*A. J.* 11). In an equally sardonic response, Alison asserts that she does not envy virtuous "pured whete" virgins, because "with barly breed, Mark telle can, / Oure Lord Jesu refresshed many a man" (Chaucer 150–53). Imbued with Alison's characteristic pragmatism, this statement can easily be understood as an uneducated woman's clumsy attempt at exegesis. However, when considered in light of both the theological contexts of Jerome's argument and scriptural ideas about spiritual and physical "refresshement," Alison's thoughtful reinterpretation of her opponent's bread metaphor reveals her theology to be much more subtle—and biblically sound—than Chaucer's satirical tone would imply. Alison views wifehood as not only biblically ordained but as spiritually necessary. In her mind, the role of "wife" is a priestly one; a wife physically "refresshes" her husband so that he can be spiritually nourished by Christ.

Both Jerome's treatise and Alison's response are rooted in the marriage instructions outlined in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In Jerome's mind, Paul's allowance of

marriage "to avoid fornication" is simply "a concession to prevent worse evil" (*KJV*, 1 Cor. 7.2, *A. J.* 11). He argues that in the absence of sexual temptation, marriage would be unnecessary and should therefore be considered as a biblical compromise rather than as a model of ideal Christian life. Just like one might provide a starving person with barley bread to prevent them from eating excrement, Jerome argues, God has provided humans with the institution of marriage to prevent them from defiling themselves with sexual immorality. Furthermore, although *Against Jovinianus* does not connect this grain metaphor with a specific biblical passage, Jerome's apologetic "Letter 48" refers to the feeding of the five thousand in John 6 as well as to the institution of the Eucharist. Drawing from St. Ambrose's book *Concerning Widows*, Jerome contrasts the multitudes of (presumably unchaste) men given barley bread with the twelve (presumably chaste) Apostles who received the body of Christ.[1] Finally, Jerome asserts that, while God cares for married people, it is virgins who are held to the "prize of the high calling" ("Letter 48" 74).

Alison's response to Jerome is formulated as a simple reversal of her opponent's logic. She points to the feeding of the five thousand to prove that barley bread remains a satisfying meal, even if pure wheat bread might be more desirable. By acknowledging that "Crist was a maide," Alison adheres to Jerome's clear distinction between chastity and marriage, and, as Warren S. Smith points out, even "accepts the primacy of celibacy" (246). However, she also emphasizes the fact that Christ deemed it appropriate to feed thousands of his adherents with ordinary "barly breed,"[2] and that the crowd was "refresshed" after eating their supper (Chaucer 145–46). Thus, in the same way that the mundanity of the bread did not lessen the crowd's satisfaction, the commonness of marriage does not affect the salvation of those who marry.

1 See Matthew 26.26–28

2 At this point, Jesus had already demonstrated his ability to transform one type of food into another, more luxurious type of food (see the wedding at Cana in John 2.1–11).

Immediately after highlighting the significance of barley, Alison takes her argument a step further by indirectly connecting the feeding of the multitudes with sexual satisfaction. She vows to "persevere" in the face of her husband's sexual appetite, using her "instrument / as freely as [her] Makere hath it sent" (154–56). This link between carnality and divinity might easily be read as another sarcastic portrayal of female brashness on Chaucer's part, but Alison's understanding of the Bible once again grants her a sense of credibility in the face of Jerome's "wide-ranging recklessness" (Smith 244). In fact, Alison has synthesized Paul's command that married couples should not "defraud" one another at risk of falling into extramarital temptation and Jesus's chastisement of a crowd who sought him "not because [they] saw the miracles, but because [they] did eat of the loaves, and were filled" (1 Cor. 7.5, John 6.26). By fulfilling her husband's sexual needs, Alison is obeying Paul's command to keep her spouse from sin, but she is also preparing him to hear the word of Jesus without being distracted by metaphorical "loaves." In other words, she is the barley bread that keeps her husband from eating excrement, but she is also preparing him to receive the ultimate feast that is the body of Christ.

This connection between physical satisfaction and spiritual satisfaction has biblical precedent that far exceeds what is outlined in Alison's prologue. The Jewish Priestly Code includes instructions for the preparation of special loaves of bread, which were to be left in the Tabernacle or Temple as the "most holy … of the offerings of the Lord made by fire" (Lev. 24.1–9). Because the bread was consecrated, those who were not priests were prohibited from consuming it. However, the book of 1 Samuel describes David breaking this law while he is hiding from King Saul. Claiming to be working under the king's orders, David asks a priest named Ahimelech to give him five loaves of hallowed bread so that he and his (fabricated) company of men can eat. Ahimelech is hesitant, but after ascertaining that David and his men "have kept themselves at least from women," he gives up the bread (1 Sam. 21.1–6). In the Gospel of

Matthew, Jesus references this story to defend his disciples after they are caught picking and eating corn on the Sabbath—a day normally reserved for rest. By reminding the Pharisees that even David, a king anointed by God, broke the laws of the Tabernacle "when he was hungered"—and, less obviously, that David's hunger caused him to sin by lying to the priest—Jesus makes it clear that the realms of physical health and spiritual health are not entirely discrete (Mat. 12.1–8).

Of course, both the story of David and Ahimelech and Jesus's subsequent commentary are very specific in their discussions of bodily needs—in fact, according to Ahimelech, sexual immorality is the only form of uncleanliness that would prevent David from eating the consecrated bread. It would seem, then, that Alison's exegetical association between sexual desire and hunger is ambitious to the point of fallacy. However, it is important to remember that Alison is applying Jerome's interpretation of 1 Corinthians (which explicitly discusses sex) to Christ's actions and teachings. Indeed, Alison's genius lies in the fact that she does not refute Jerome's theology, but rather approaches it with a "down-to-earth practicality" that attempts to make virtue attainable to those women for whom celibacy is not an option (Smith 246). She uses Paul's theology to legitimize her own experiences and refers to the ultimate authority of Jesus to "look at things as they are in the experience of everyday life and not as they are in fancy or hope" (Smith 246). From this pragmatic, meaning-focused perspective, there is little difference between Christ authorizing David's consumption of the sacred bread and Paul authorizing the Corinthians's marital sexual intercourse; in simplest terms, both are instances in which physical purity (of the bread or of the body) is conditionally corrupted for the sake of spiritual purity.

This interplay of the sacred, the mundane, and the profane is even more remarkable when considered against the backdrop of late medieval attitudes towards the relationship between bread and holiness. As I have already stated, Alison's exegesis hinges on the fact that, despite being com-

mon, barley bread (or marriage) is a divinely sanctioned form of refreshment (or way of living). However, in medieval Europe, barley carried religious significance beyond being mentioned in John 6. In the fourteenth century, it was customary to exchange "soul-cakes" (which were miniature loaves, often made from barley or other inexpensive grains) on festival days in the hope that the recipient might be spiritually nourished and renewed by consuming the bread (Bayless 360). Therefore, when Alison proudly claims the "barly breed" label for herself and other wives, she is using Jerome's metaphor to reinforce the importance of marriage in providing both physical satisfaction and spiritual nourishment. Like most of Alison's theology, this idea finds scriptural precedent in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Concerning what he will later call "unequally yoked" marriages,[3] Paul writes that "the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband" (1 Cor. 7.14). This statement implies that the marriage bond imports a certain level of spiritual unity upon a couple, once again confirming the legitimacy of Alison's portrait of marriage.

Ultimately, Alison's exegesis transcends the reactionary brashness often imposed upon her character to reveal an argument that is both intelligent and, for the most part, orthodox in its approach to scripture. She uses Jerome's barley metaphor to encompass a wide range of scriptural and historical ideas about bread, thereby formulating a compelling, yet still biblical, conception of marriage and virtue. By figuring wives as priests, Alison elevates women without deifying them and frames marriage as a physical and spiritual transaction that benefits the husband as much as it benefits the wife. She acknowledges the elitist view of celibacy held by Jerome and Ambrose but also appropriates their works to empower other women and foster fellowship with other wives. Furthermore, by focusing her attention on the mundane, Alison creates a picture of virtue that encourages participation from everyone, be they "pured whete"

3 See 2 Corinthians 6.14

or "barly breed." Situated within a group of tales that often force female characters and narrators to choose between virtue and pleasure, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" offers women the radical opportunity to have both. Alison builds a gate in the wall of the Prioress and Second Nun's cloister and creates a space in the socio-religious fabric of *The Canterbury Tales* in which women can find both spiritual and physical satisfaction.

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