

Severus' Epistle on the Jews

Outline of a new perspective¹

The epistle attributed to Severus, a nebulous bishop in early fifth century Menorca², has sporadically evoked some scholarly interest. Composed in Latin and addressed to «the most holy and blessed lords, bishops, priests, deacons and the universal brotherhood of all the lands of the earth», it is a lengthy document of some five and a half thousand words³. At first it apparently bore no title, but it has been known as the *Epistola de Judaeis* ever since the theologians of Louvain so named it in the sixteenth century⁴. The epistle records the conversion of an entire Jewish community through the instrumentality of Severus and the inspiration of the recently discovered relics of the martyred St. Stephen. Some of these relics, not all, as might be inferred from the epistle, had been fortuitously brought to Menorca and deposited in a church in Mahon, then its principal town.

Scholarly interest in the epistle has revolved around two fundamental questions: its authorship and its historicity. If the work of Severus or people close to him, the epistle becomes the only source for Sephardic Jewry in the fifth century and the earliest document on the Church in the

1 This article presents the main contours of a longer study in preparation. Exigencies of space have determined its structure and focus, limited its analysis of details and kept its bibliographical references to a minimum.

2 For some data on Severus see J. M. Bover y Rosselló, *Biblioteca de escritores baleares* (Palma 1868) vol. 2, p. 397, n. 1206. Bover regards Severus as the first bishop of Menorca.

3 The epistle was first published in C. Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Rome 1594), thereafter frequently on the basis of Baronius (e.g., Migne, *PL*, vols. 20 and 41 of the general series) and most recently, with a critical edition, by G. Seguí Vidal, *La carta encíclica del obispo Severo* (Palma de Mallorca n.d. 1937?).

4 Seguí Vidal, pp. 19, 35.