

# Severus' Epistle on the Jews

## Outline of a new perspective<sup>1</sup>

The epistle attributed to Severus, a nebulous bishop in early fifth century Menorca<sup>2</sup>, 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 words<sup>3</sup>. 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 century<sup>4</sup>. 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 enciclica del obispo Severo* (Palma de Mallorca n.d. 1937?).

4 Seguí Vidal, pp. 19, 35.

Balearic Islands. If a later work, the value of the epistle is considerably diminished, though it is still useful for the light it may shed on the period to which it is alternatively assigned.

An analysis of the epistle's authorship entails a study of three possibilities: A1) that the epistle was wholly composed by Severus or his circle; A2) that it was composed at a considerably later date, and A3) that it was composed in part by Severus or his circle, and that there were later changes, additions or both. An analysis of the epistle's historicity also involves three possibilities: B1) that all data in the epistle is acceptable as historically accurate, with perhaps minor corrections in some details; B2) that all data in the epistle must be rejected as fictional; and B3) that some data is acceptable while other data must be rejected.

Difficult as the separate study of the authorship or historicity of a document may be, the study of the interrelationship of these two elements is always more complex. Theoretically, in the case of the epistle, any possibility in section A above can link with any possibility in section B. A priori, however, the burden of proof falls entirely upon those who would dislodge the epistle from its claimed authorship or its implicit claim of historicity.

Various writers have stated their position on one or both of these questions, but to date, with one possible exception, there has been no thorough examination of the problems they pose or their interrelationship. Several studies even manifest a tacit assumption that the establishment of Severus' authorship automatically validates the correctness of all, or at least part of the data in the epistle, and, conversely, that the establishment of a later date invalidates the historicity of its alleged events.

Thus, for example, Díaz y Díaz<sup>5</sup> and Blumenkranz<sup>6</sup> reject Severus' authorship in favor of a seventh century Iberian context for author and data. On the other hand,

<sup>5</sup> M. C. Díaz y Díaz, 'De patristica española', *Revista española de teología*, 17 (1957) pp. 11 f.

<sup>6</sup> B. Blumenkranz, *Les Auteurs Chrétiens Latins du Moyen Age sur les Juifs et le Judaïsme* (Paris 1963) pp. 106 ff.

Ramírez Sádaba<sup>7</sup> supports early fifth century authorship on linguistic grounds, and, in the most detailed study of the epistle thus far, Seguí Vidal<sup>8</sup> argues for both Severus' authorship of the epistle and the historicity of its details. Some, like Roig<sup>9</sup>, Flórez<sup>10</sup>, Fita<sup>11</sup> and Dahn<sup>12</sup> assume authenticity of authorship and posit the correctness of the epistle's data. Others, like Du Mesnil<sup>13</sup>, Bover de Rosselló<sup>14</sup>, Jüster<sup>15</sup> and García Villada<sup>16</sup>, assume authenticity of authorship but to various degrees question the historicity of the epistle's details. Baer<sup>17</sup>, without alluding to authorship, defends the genuineness of what he regards to be the epistle's «historical account».

Of the two questions, authorship and historicity, the second is more basic and provides a more useful starting point for analysis.

For this purpose it is advisable to divide the data of the epistle into six categories:

1. Public miracles. These include the simultaneous deep sleep that overcame the Christian and Jewish «armies» preparing to fight a battle of faith; the Christians' complete escape from injury from the rocks thrown by the Jews; the enormous sphere of light behind the basilica reminiscent of the pillar of fire in the Book of Exodus; the honey-

7 J. L. Ramírez Sádaba, *Estudio ideológico de la carta de Severo de Menorca* (University of Salamanca 1968) typescript.

8 Seguí Vidal, pp. 35 ff.

9 A. Roig, *De sacris apud Minorem Balearem antistibus Severo potissimum deque istius epistola exercitatio et in eandem epistolam animadversiones* (Palma 1787) p. 247.

10 E. Flórez, *España Sagrada*, 15 (Madrid 1759) p. 341.

11 F. Fita, 'La cristiandad baleárica hasta fines del siglo VI, apuntes históricos', *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia*, 64 (1914), pp. 542 ff.

12 F. Dahn, *Die Könige der Germanen*, 6 (Wirburg 1871) p. 420, n. 7.

13 L. Du Mesnil, *Doctrina et disciplina Ecclesiae*, 2 (Venice 1752) p. 84.

14 J. M. Bover y Rosselló, *Historia general del reino de Mallorca*, 2 (Palma 1841) p. 691.

15 J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain*, 2 vols. (Paris 1914), especially Vol. 1, p. 78.

16 Z. García Villada, *Historia eclesiástica de España*, Vol. 1, part 2 (Madrid 1929) pp. 261 f.

17 Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 1 (Philadelphia 1961) p. 382.

18 For the theory here see any of the large number of general introductions to the subject (v.g. G. J. Renier, *History: Its Purpose and Method* [London 1950]). See also the introductory remarks to M. A. Cohen, *Two Sister Faiths* (Worcester 1983) and the volume *A Theory of History*, in preparation.

like fragrance of the hail, recalling the ancient Israelites' manna; the conversion of learned Jews without need for Scriptural discussion; the rain amidst the fair weather preceding the conversion of Jews to Christianity; the bouquet and taste of honey in the water fetched by a maid; and the immediate answers to prayers by Christians for the conversion of the wife of the important Jewish citizen, Innocentius.

2. Private dreams. These include the detailed dreams of the nun Theodora and the head of the Jewish community, Theodorus.

3. Private events directly attributable to human initiative. These include Meletius' confession to Innocentius of his inability to remove the thought of Christianity from his heart; the despair of Meletius and Innocentius on losing their way and the role of these events in their conversion to Christianity, and Meletius' testimony to the increase of anti-Jewish feeling in Menorca.

4. Public events directly attributable to human initiative and directly related to the theme of the epistle. These include the visit to Menorca by an unnamed bishop bearing the relics of St. Stephen; the placement of these relics in the church at Mahon; the formation of a Christian group to proceed against the Jews; the gathering of arms by the Jews; the «struggles of religion against the Jews in all the streets, the battles of faith in all the homes»; Severus' invitation to the Jews to listen to him at the Church in Mahon, and, on their refusal, to do so in their synagogue; the destruction of the synagogue; the conversion of leading Jews, and along with each or each group, the conversion of significant numbers of unnamed Jews; the total number of conversions declared to be 540; the time span of the entire process declared to be eight days; and the razing of the synagogue's foundations and the construction of a basilica in its place with the contribution of the funds and labor of the erstwhile Jews.

5. Public events unrelated and incidental to the main thread of the epistle. The main data here may be subsumed into two sub-categories and may include some details assign-

ned to category 4 above. The two subcategories are the Jews and Menorca. The epistle discloses the Menorcan Jews to be highly acculturated and integrated into the general society. They reveal a knowledge of Greek and Latin letters, and except for Reuben, all the Jews mentioned in the epistle bear Graeco-Roman names. The Jews live quasi-autonomously under Jewish laws and institutions, participate with freedom and success in the enterprise of the community at large, and enjoy honors and status related to their contributions. Regarding Menorca, the epistle describes it with a few details, mentions two major towns, Jammaona (Ciudadela) and Magona (Mahon) and contrasts Mahon's obvious encouragement of a thriving Jewish community in its midst with Ciudadela's long-standing prohibition against the admission of Jews.

6. Editorial comments. These depict Christianity in the finest possible light. The epistle states as its purpose the declaration of the acts of Christ; praises Christianity's missionary zeal; suggests the intervention of St. Stephen in events, including the location of his relics in the church at Mahon; sees the conversion of the Jews as a mission that is reflected in nature as well as biblical texts; stresses the lofty religiosity of the Christian warriors. By contrast, it depicts the Jews as «comparable to wolves and foxes in their ferocity and wickedness», as perfidious, superstitious and «weighed down with the incurable disease of incredulity».

It must be stated *ab initio* that these categories of data are of diverse weight for purposes of historical reconstruction. To be sure, the admissibility of data for such reconstruction is largely a function of the assumptive structures explicitly or implicitly utilized by the historian. While historians often and even regularly adopt assumptive systems to validate their personal or institutional commitments, the methodologies of the cotemporary social sciences rest on fundamental assumptions that provide an univicious starting point and maximize communication. For purposes of this study we need only note three consequences of such assumptions: The quest five a perspective or bias in all sources; they analysis of data humanistically and naturalisti-

cally', and the simulation's conclusions that are to a greater or lesser degree tentative and typologically confirmed, with full allowance for all variables, from the proximate, and where necessary, the more remote temporal and spatial contexts of the data <sup>19</sup>.

From such considerations no contemporary probe of the epistle of Severus can responsibly accept as historical any of the miracles in the first two categories. Seguí Vidal's acceptance of these miracles essentially corresponds to a pre-modern position, which, though occasionally continuing into the modern world, can only ultimately lead to historiographical solipsism. The data behind these alleged miracles, once reconstructed, are, of course, historically admissible, but as such they are essentially irrelevant to both the point and the context of the epistle.

The data in these categories completely support the epistle's perspective or bias, which becomes unmistakably evident the moment its editorial comments are isolated. The epistle is the document of a united, triumphalist Catholicism focused on the amazing conversion under its banner of a Jewish community which only a week earlier was clearly secure in its identity and commitment. The editorial comments also leave no doubt that the data contained in the epistle have been selected and deflected in the service of this perspective.

The perspective is also apparent in the epistle's structure. The epistle is divisible into six sections: a brief introduction, a brief conclusion and four substantial intermediate sections of approximately equal size. The intermediate sections begin respectively with the march against the Jews, the conversion of Reuben, the globe of light and the prolific rains. Narrated with high drama, each of these sections revolves around a miraculous event or chain of events. Three of the four are dedicated to the details of the conversions. Only the first focuses, and then hardly adequately, on the process leading to these events.

In this light, the data in category 3, uncorroborable even typologically and obviously conditioned by the bias, must

19 W. M. T. Gamble, 'Orosius (c. 380 - c. 420)', in P. Guilday, *Church Historians* (New York 1926) pp. 30-70, p. 35.

be regarded as possessing minimum historical value. This includes Meletius' superfluous acknowledgement of the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment.

On the other hand, the data in the fourth and fifth categories possess a much greater presumption of historical credibility. Since those in category 4 carry the epistle's main theme they must be carefully scrutinized for incursions of the epistle's bias and in many instances subjected to typological reconstruction. Thus, for example, the epistle's claim of a total, speedy and voluntary conversion of the Jewish community, for which we would be hard put to find a supportable parallel in all of Jewish history, suggests the obfuscation of what in reality could well have been a total and speedy conversion by force, followed by a compulsory demonstration of loyalty through the religious labor of razing the synagogue structure and building the basilica. That even such conversion could not have failed to produce recalcitrants is cogently suggested by typological considerations.

The data in the fifth category, serving mostly to provide a context adequate to the epistle's message, possess the highest degree of credibility, though here to one cannot overlook the role of selectivity and deflection. In general the details in this section cohere integrally with what is known or reasonably reconstructible with regard to the early fifth century Iberian world. In the case of the Jews, many places had Jewish communities with similar acculturation and achievement. With regard to Menorca, the geographical descriptions and other incidental details are essentially correct and need not be regarded as anomalous. Certainly correct for this period as it is for the preceding centuries is the epistle's witness to the support of Jews by Christian groups, a support which Catholic Christianity in its ascendancy had already sought to undermine as early as the Council of Elvira at the beginning of the fourth century.

This information two baffling questions, the answers to which are indispensable for an analysis of the epistle's purpose: Could it be that Ciudadela, where the Christian «army» or at least its spearhead, assembled, was a Catholic

stronghold, while Mahon was still riddled with internecine struggles among Christian groups? and Could it be that beneath its semblance of a united Catholic Christianity, and behind its story of the conversion of the Jews, the epistle suggests such a struggle in Mahon? Such struggles had been in progress since the beginning of the Church and were no exception in the Iberian world. At the time of the alleged composition of Severus' epistle, Catholic Christianity in the Iberian world was beset by the forces of Priscillianism. Writing around this time, Augustine compared the Priscillian heresy with the recent Germanic invasion of the Peninsula and declared that the doctrines of Priscillianism «much more banefully mangle the souls of the Spaniards than do the barbaric swords their bodies»<sup>20</sup>. Augustine might have said the same about the remnants of Pelagianism and the presence of other sectarians.

In this connection it is important to note that the unnamed bishop mentioned in the epistle as the bearer of the relics of St. Stephen has been identified as Orosius, a native of the Iberian Peninsula, and a follower of Augustine. Orosius was on his way to Africa by way of Braga. That he did not reach Braga but had to stop at Menorca because of the Germanic invasions, or, as the epistle at one point says, «the calamity of the lands of Hispania», is most plausible. Orosius appeared in 414 as the author of a tract on the origin of the soul against the followers of Priscillian and Origen. He also battled Pelagianism in the Holy Land, and in 417-18 he put the finishing touches on his *Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans*, a work which was to dominate Christian historiography well into the Middle Ages. It is no coincidence that the discovery of St. Stephen's relics in 415 came precisely at the height of Catholicism's campaign against Priscillianism and that they were carried to Western Europe and North Africa to aid in this struggle.

There is thus every reason to suppose that the actions against the Jews recorded in the epistle were part of a larger struggle between Catholicism and alternative Christian positions. The epistle's concentration on the Jews and

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39 ff.



obfuscation of internal Christian differences finds parallels elsewhere in Iberia and other parts of the Christian world.

This possibility adds a new dimension to the question of the epistle's purpose. In this regard we may pose two sets of questions: I. Was this purpose: a) merely to record a contemporary triumph of faith with the pious hope, expressed in the epistle's conclusion, for the universal conversion of the Jews? or b) to record such triumph for the purpose of inspiring similar conversionist efforts elsewhere? or c) to record such triumph as evidence of the Catholic triumph over other Christian groups regarded as heretical; and II. Was this purpose, on the assumption that the document was composed later, to record an older, contemporary, or fictitious triumph of faith as por a), b) or c) above. The answer we propose is Ic, leaving open, however, the possible use of the epistle for similar purposes at later times.

Despite the burden of proof upon scholars who regard the epistle as pseudepigraphic, the doubts they have cast upon its authorship cannot be lightly dismissed. The earliest manuscripts, corrupt and dating from the eleventh century, raise the additional questions of textual transmission and redaction. The detailed study of all these elements is beyond the scope of this outline-essay. Suffice it here to say that while some redaction cannot be ruled out, the text gives every indication of essential compositional integrity. With regard to the possible anachronism of the admonitory letter (*epistola commonitorium*) mentioned by Severus much remains to be said. As for its content, there is every reason to deny the identity of this *epistola commonitorium* with the document known as the *Altercatio Ecclesiae et Synagogae*.

MARTIN A. COHEN  
Hebrew Union College  
New York