

Mediterranean Jews in a Christianizing Empire

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Introduction

One of the hallmarks of late antiquity was the preoccupation with dividing people into discrete categories. As Averil Cameron has written, “[w]hat was taking place in late antiquity in intellectual and imaginative terms was surely a competitive process of system construction, a persistent impulse towards definition.”¹ This drive to define “self” and “other,” which characterized both imperial and Christian discourses, represented a potent means for managing—while never homogenizing or eliminating—difference.² To a considerable degree, this impulse was motivated by concerns over the porous boundaries that only ever imperfectly separated various “religious” communities from each other in social reality.³ The categorization of people into distinct groups, often with their own unique monikers, allowed certain Christians to establish and police the boundaries of their version of Christianity.

This process went hand in hand with structural changes in the dynamic interaction of church and empire during the “long fifth century,” from the beginning of the rule of Theodosius I to the beginning of age of Justinian I (ca. 380–525 CE). Emperors and other imperial representatives supported, promoted, and influenced the theological definitions articulated by councils, bishops, and various Christian writers. And it is precisely during this period that we

¹ Averil Cameron, “Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity,” in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valanstasis (eds.), *Asceticism* (New York, 1995) 147–61, here 156.

² Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia, 2012).

³ See the early and influential statement in Jonathan Z. Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds.), *“To See Ourselves as Others See Us”: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity* (Chico, Calif., 1985) 3–48.

begin to find imperial legislation and, at times, even military action directed against “heretical” groups.⁴ Definition could thus carry concrete religious, social, and legal ramifications.⁵

Jewish historians and scholars of rabbinic Judaism have persuasively stressed the formative impact that the “Christianization” of the Roman Empire had on the nature of Judaism as a discursive category as well as on the forms and structures of Jewish culture and society from the late fourth to early sixth century.⁶ At the same time, it has been rightly observed that, to a significant degree, the Jewish populations of the Roman Empire remained fully integrated into the venerable structures of Mediterranean life well into sixth century.⁷ There is much to recommend both of these accounts; indeed, they need not be contradictory. The “Christian Roman Empire” of late antiquity remained deeply rooted in the imperial narratives, institutions, and practices that had long ensured social, economic, and political stability, especially in the eastern Mediterranean.⁸ Nevertheless, this period also saw the rapid crystallization of the ideological desire *and* institutional capacity of both church and state to classify, manage—and, in some cases, subject to targeted acts of violence—various dissident religious groupings against whom Christians might feel themselves to be in conflict, Jews among them.⁹

⁴ Such legislation is famously clustered into book 16 of the *Theodosian Code* (hereafter *CTh*). On the use of the label *superstitio* for all “non-Catholic” beliefs and, hence, as a mechanism for distinguishing “normative from non-normative religious practices,” see Michele R. Salzman, “‘*Superstitio*’ in the *Codex Theodosianus* and the Persecution of Pagans,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987) 172–88, here 182.

⁵ See especially David Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code,” in Jill Harries and Ian Wood (eds.), *The Theodosian Code* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993) 143–58.

⁶ Most influentially, Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, 2001); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004); Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Christianity and Judaism Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, 2012).

⁷ See especially Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York, 2008).

⁸ On the relationship of the Christianizing Roman Empire of late antiquity to earlier Roman imperial structures and traditions, see the recent synthesis in Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, 2012) 1–90.

⁹ Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II, 408–450* (Berkeley, 2006) 116–29.

What, then, are we to make of this puzzling juxtaposition between the far-reaching impact of Christianization on Jews and Judaism, on the one hand, and the broad continuities in the fabric of Mediterranean society, on the other? In this paper, we explore three episodes of Christian violence directed against Jews in the late fourth and fifth century. We argue that the complex and contingent relationship between ecclesiastical and imperial institutions disclosed in these episodes provides insight into the anatomy of Christianization, as this process unfolded both locally and empire-wide. In emphasizing moments of conflict and even violence between Jews and Christians, we do not intend to ignore either the ongoing quotidian interactions among these groups or the generative impact of Christian idioms and institutional forms on Jewish literary and material culture. Rather, we believe that these episodes will allow us to move beyond the grand narratives of this period to consider the variegated conditions of Jewish communal life at the conjunction of church and empire

I. Christianization and the Shifting Conjunctions of Church and Empire

The concept of “Christianization” requires us to take great care and caution, especially as it relates to the transformation of Jewish life in late antiquity. In fact, there is powerful heuristic value in treating “church” and “empire” as distinct analytical categories, so that the historian can trace how these institutional forces intersect at times and diverge at others.¹⁰ In this regard, applying the label “Christian” to the Roman Empire from Constantine onwards can be misleading. Imperial privilege was not extended to a single and continuous group of “orthodox” Christians. The specific Christians that received imperial support—that is, those designated as orthodox—frequently shifted according to the sympathies and practical concerns of the emperors

¹⁰ Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 140–48. For a compelling critique of an overly general or uniform model of Christianization, see Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire,” 143–58.

and their officials.¹¹ In other words, Christianization should not be conceptualized in overly general terms as a uniform, empire-wide process in which the “Christian” empire replaced its “pagan” forerunner. Rather, this notion must be nuanced to account for the complex processes of appropriation through which ecclesiastical and imperial elites Christianized traditional Roman forms of knowledge and educational institutions.¹² More importantly for our purposes here, it must give due consideration to the intense competition, shifting allegiances, and even bitter invective that existed within and across imperial and ecclesiastical domains.

In light of this complex imperial–ecclesiastical arrangement, it should come as no surprise that there were divergent views among late antique Christians concerning the proper relationship between church and empire as well as concerning the extent to which the empire could genuinely be understood as Christian. Robert Markus has demonstrated that there were different perspectives on the relationship between empire and church, both immediately before and immediately after the sack of Rome in 410 CE.¹³ On one end of the spectrum was Eusebius, who viewed the empire under (and personified by) Constantine as the eschatological culmination of Christian *Heilsgeschichte*.¹⁴ On the other end, we find Augustine, who divided the church and the empire into separate categories (or “cities”), the latter encompassing all earthly rule (not just the Roman Empire) and only occasionally and inscrutably intersecting with the former.¹⁵

¹¹ Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 168–91.

¹² See especially Hervé Ingelbert, *Interpretatio christiana: Les mutations des savoirs, cosmographie, géographie, histoire, dans l'antiquité chrétienne, 30–630 après J.-C.* (Paris, 2001); Ingelbert, *Les Romains Chrétiens face à l'Histoire de Rome: Histoire, Christianisme et Romanités en Occident dans l'Antiquité tardive (IIIe–Ve siècles)* (Paris, 1996).

¹³ Robert A. Markus, “The Roman Empire in Early Christian Historiography,” *The Downside Review* 81 (1963) 340–54. Compare Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic* (Oxford, 2004) 92–111, which charts the views of church-empire relations in terms of an east–west dichotomy.

¹⁴ E.g., *Praep. ev.* 1.4; *Hist. eccl.* 10.1.3–6; *Laud. Const.* 1.6; 3.5–6, 18.12; *Vit. Const.*, passim. See also, Prudentius, *C. Symm.* 1.587–590.

¹⁵ See especially *Civ.* 28.53.1–2; 20.11. In Markus’ words, “[i]n Augustine’s hands the Roman Empire has lost its religious dimension...the Empire is no longer God’s chose instrument for the salvation of men, no longer is it indispensable for the unfolding of his plan in history” (“Roman Empire in Early Christian Historiography,” 347).

In addition, certain believers in Jesus, who suffered real or perceived persecution under this self-proclaimed Christian empire, questioned the extent to which the empire was truly and properly Christian at all.¹⁶ In the early fifth century, the so-called Donatists of North Africa grew increasingly alienated from imperial institutions and were ultimately subject to state-sponsored repression and violence.¹⁷ Christian hesitation about—or even out-and-out critique of—the Roman Empire did not abate with the tighter embrace of “orthodoxy” under Theodosius II. On the contrary, the later fifth and sixth centuries saw the deep and lasting rupture between the imperially-sponsored Chalcedonian churches and the anti-Chalcedonian opposition. Thus, Stephen, the “Miaphysite” bishop of Herakleopolis Magna, deploys the stark language of the Apocalypse of John to describe his Chalcedonian opponents, including the emperor Justinian, who rigorously promoted and defended the Chalcedonian faith:

I saw, said John in his Apocalypse, a star that had fallen from heaven. The pit of the abyss was opened. Smoke of a great fire went up. The sun and the air became dark through the smoke of the pit, the pit of the impiety which the rulers had gathered up who had come together to Chalcedon. This very pit of the abyss was opened again in the days of the Emperor Justinian.¹⁸

Even as the relationship between church and empire hardened in imperial discourse, voices such as Stephen’s offer us important perspective on the “Christian empire” from those Christians whose theological commitments and community were out-of-step with the imperially-sponsored form of Christianity.¹⁹ For Stephen and other anti-Chalcedonians, imperial support for the

¹⁶ While the theme of persecution is pervasive in anti-Chalcedonian literature, the extent to which rhetorical claims regarding the persecution of anti-Chalcedonian groups reflect social reality remains uncertain; see Leslie MacCoull, “‘When Justinian was Upsetting the World’: A Note on Soldiers and Religious Coercion in Sixth-Century Egypt,” in Timothy S. Miller, John Nesbitt (eds.), *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.* (Washington, D.C., 1995) 106–13.

¹⁷ For brilliant dissection of the anatomy of this intra-Christian conflict, see Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011).

¹⁸ Karl Heinz Kuhn, ed. and trans., *A Panegyric on Apollo, Archimandrite of the Monastery of Isaac, by Stephen Archbishop of Heracleopolis Magna*, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1978) 2:10–11.

¹⁹ For the date of the *Panegyric on Apollo*, see Kuhn, *Panegyric on Apollo*, 1:xii.

Chalcedonian faith meant that there was a rupture between the empire and the “true” church.²⁰ Thus, rather than a “Christian empire,” anti-Chalcedonians—and probably other marginalized Christian groups—saw themselves as confronting a “heretical empire.”²¹

These diverse perspectives should remind us that the portrait of a single, unified Christian empire was by and large a construct of the powerful and, hence, runs the risk of obfuscating the spectrum of opinions on church–empire relations as well as the shifting configurations of church and empire throughout late antiquity. We suggest, therefore, that the Christianization of the empire between the late fourth and early sixth centuries is thus best seen as an uneven and highly contested process that unfolded, without strict coordination, at various social, institutional, and symbolic registers.

II. Jewish Life at the Intersection of Church and Empire

Jewish life in the Roman Empire during the fifth century was increasingly shaped at the intersection of imperial and ecclesiastical forces. As we shall see, imperial protection of Jews, their property, and their communal institutions were largely contingent upon the ability of the empire to restrain the more extreme elements of the church. Yet, the dynamic and shifting nature of the interaction between church and empire meant that the precise impact of these forces on Jewish life could vary tremendously from context to context.

Although imperial legislation in the post-Constantinian period typically treated “heretics” as outlaws, it took a more nuanced approach to the relationship between Jews, the empire, and

²⁰ David W. Johnson, “Anti-Chalcedonian Polemics in Coptic Texts, 451–641,” in Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring (eds.), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1986) 216–34; Tito Orlandi, “Patristic Texts in Coptic,” in A. di Berardino (ed.), *Patrology: The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon (451) to John of Damascus († 750)* (Cambridge, 2006) 491–570, esp. 555–65.

²¹ Markus, “Roman Empire in Early Christian Historiography,” 345.

various other groups and institutional interests in society, including the church.²² For instance, beginning in the late fourth century, Jews enjoyed the official protection of the empire against Christian violence.²³

Two laws issued by Arcadius (with Honorius) on 17 June 397 exemplify this protection. The first law (*CTh* 16.8.12) requires a meeting of governors to ensure their knowledge of the necessity “to repel the assaults of those who attack Jews, and that their synagogues should remain in their accustomed peace.”²⁴ The second law (*CTh* 9.45.2) prohibited Jews from feigning Christian conversion in order to avoid paying debts owed. The latter law was a significant blow to Christian proselytization to the Jews, which relied heavily on the appeal of asylum.²⁵ Amnon Linder thus fittingly observes that these laws are “... a good indication of the favourable disposition of the court towards the Jews at that time.”²⁶

This legal imperative to protect the Jews and their synagogues from acts of violence occasionally angered certain Christians. For instance, the Syriac *Life of Simeon Stylites* records a letter that Simeon wrote to Theodosius II containing a stark and ominous prediction of divine retribution against the emperor for his wrong-headed support of the Jews:

Now that your heart is exalted and you have disregarded the Lord your God who gave you the glorious diadem and the royal throne, now that you have become a friend and companion and protector to unbelieving Jews, behold suddenly the righteous judgment of God will overtake you and all who are of the same mind as you in this matter. You will

²² Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 149–57.

²³ E. D. Hunt, “St. Stephen in Minorca: An Episode in Jewish–Christian Relations in the Early Fifth Century AD,” *JTS* n.s. 33 (1982) 106–23, here 117.

²⁴ Translated in Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Imperial Roman Legislation* (Detroit, 1987) 198. All translations of *CTh* are taken from Linder’s book unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ Linder, *Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, 199. An additional law, dating to 24 September 416 CE, allowed Jews who had converted to Christianity to escape financial obligations to return to Judaism (*CTh* 16.8.23). It should be noted that, conversely, imperial legislation also placed significant restrictions on Jewish proselytization of Christians (e.g., *CTh* 3.1.5).

²⁶ Linder, *Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, 198.

lift up your hands to heaven and say in your affliction, “Truly this anger has come on me because I broke faith with the Lord God.”²⁷

These ominous words—whether they in fact go back to Simeon or are merely the work of his anonymous biographer—stress that imperial support of the Jews will provoke God to punish not only the emperor but his entire empire. More importantly, this testimony epitomizes the pressures exerted on the emperors during this period to achieve balance between administrating a successful empire and appeasing the convictions of certain Christians.²⁸

This balance did not always tip in favor of Jewish interests in legislative action. Increasingly during the fifth century, many imperial laws were issued that placed heavy restrictions on the Jews, especially in instances in which the Jews and their customs were perceived to threaten Christian hegemony or imperial stability.²⁹ One notable area of legislation surrounds the future construction of synagogues. Although imperial law continued to protect synagogues from being destroyed, various laws prohibited the construction of new synagogues. For example, *CTh* 16.8.27 states, “[w]hat we legislated recently concerning the Jews and their synagogues shall remain in force, namely, that they shall never be permitted to build new synagogues, neither shall they dread that the old ones shall be seized from them.”³⁰

²⁷ *Life of Simeon Stylites*, 121–123, translated in Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 128. The *vita* was probably written shortly after the death of Simeon in 459 CE; see Frederick Lent, trans., *The Life of Saint Simeon Stylites: A Translation of the Syriac Text in Bedjan’s Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (Merchantville, N.J., 2009) ix.

²⁸ Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 128.

²⁹ E.g., *CTh* 3.1.5 (= *Brev.* 3.1.5), 16.2.31 + 16.5.46 (= *Sirm.* 14), 16.5.44, 16.8.6 (= 16.9.2), 16.8.7 (= *Brev.* 16.3.2; *CJust* 1.7.1), 16.8.18 (= *CJust* 1.9.11), 16.8.19, 16.8.22, 25, 27; *CJust* 1.9.7. In a law dating to 438 CE, Theodosius II prevented Jews from political or military service on the grounds that incorrect belief may lead to treachery (*Nov. Theod.* 3.2).

³⁰ The prior legislation in mind most likely refers to *CTh* 16.8.25, dated to 15 February 423 CE (Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, 290). This law concludes with the following instructions: “No synagogue shall be constructed from now on, and the old ones shall remain in their state.” See also *CTh* 16.8.27 and *CJ* 1.9.8.

Yet, despite such laws against the construction of synagogues, it is precisely during this period that we find a proliferation in the building of synagogues.³¹ This tension between law and reality may reflect problems that pre-modern empires faced more generally, both in terms of the sheer limitations of enforcement and the general ideology of governance.³² In any event, Hayim Lapin is certainly correct when he suggests that the Jews were “a particular kind of subject, governed by specific rules that neither prohibited their existence or practices—as Roman law attempted for Christian heresies and for pagans—nor fully incorporated them without religion- or ethnos-specific limitations.”³³

These imperial laws also reveal that Jewish life within the Christianizing Roman Empire varied according the religious and political conditions on the ground. Indeed, Christianization did not look the same at all times and in all places. Not only did the particular group or belief-structure that was considered “Christian” from the vantage point of the empire frequently change, but limits were placed by the empire on what Christians could or could not do to the Jews. It should be highlighted that this distinction between the institutions of church and empire should not imply an absolute taxonomic bifurcation of the categories “religion” and “politics.”³⁴ We now turn to consider three examples that demonstrate some of the diverse configurations of imperial and Christian forces, and their impact on Jewish life in the long fifth century.

³¹ For up-to-date assessment of the impact of Christianization on synagogue construction in Palestine, see Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land from the Destruction of Solomon’s Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (New York, 2012), 309–19, and the literature cited there.

³² Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 2000).

³³ Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans*, 17.

³⁴ On the problems of associated with “religion” as a discrete category in antiquity, see now Brent Nongbri, “Dislodging ‘Embedded’ Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope,” *Numen* 55 (2008) 440–60; Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013).

III. Jewish Communities at the Intersection of Local and Global Forces: Three Test-Cases

Jewish life within the Christianizing Roman Empire of late antiquity was largely contingent upon the particular interaction of three micro-forces: the local Jewish community, the local Christian community, and the local presence of imperial representatives. These localized factors were further inflected by empire-wide dynamics of church and empire. In some cases, church and empire (globally conceived) were absent in interactions between Jews and Christians, while, in other cases, Jewish–Christian interactions were framed by global Christian and imperial projects. In this sense, we believe it more useful to approach examples of anti-Jewish violence not purely or even primarily as chapters, however punctuated, in a single, empire-wide story of Jewish–Christian relations, but as moments in which local and trans-local forces coincided and thereby crystallized the ever-shifting relationship between church and empire. Almost by definition, the few such events preserved in written documents for posterity are likewise distinctive for having transcended their local dimensions and entered the trans-local stream of literary memory.

Unfortunately, the historian of late antiquity faces numerous challenges when identifying social relations between local Jewish and Christian communities, especially in the far-flung Mediterranean diaspora. Beyond the difficulties inherent in identifying Jewish communities through the use of archaeological or documentary evidence, the label “Jew” became a standard metaphor for identifying and defining “heretics” within late antique Christian literature.³⁵ In other words, Christian discussions of “Jews” do not always refer to ethnic Jews.

Not surprisingly, what can be reconstructed from literary, documentary, and archaeological materials indicates that relations between Jews and Christians during the “long

³⁵ See especially Averil Cameron, “Jews and Heretics—A Category Error?” in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen, 2003) 345–60; also Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 271–80.

fifth century” were complex and manifold. In certain contexts, relations were peaceful or, at the very least, not marked by physical violence.³⁶ For instance, in 402 CE, Christians in Tripolitania consulted with Jewish scholars concerning the proper translation of the Hebrew Bible after a riot broke out over Jerome’s new Latin translation.³⁷ John Chrysostom also alludes to close relations between Jews and Christians in Antioch—albeit much to his chagrin. He writes:

If, then, the Jews fail to know the Father, if they crucified the Son, if they thrust off the help of the Spirit, who should not make bold to declare plainly that the synagogue is a dwelling of demons? God is not worshipped there. Heaven forbid! From now on it remains a place of idolatry. But still some people pay it honor as a holy place.³⁸

Chrysostom here expresses his concern that some of the Christians within his flock did not have sufficient theological or social reservations about visiting synagogues or turning to Jewish ritual experts for blessings.

The “pluralistic” posture adopted by some Christians well reflects the function of synagogues within local communities. As several scholars have noted, synagogues served as local municipal buildings that facilitated quotidian interactions between Jews, Christians, and other local residents, ranging from business and civic matters to more mundane contacts.³⁹ Of course, synagogues served a unique and special function for Jews as a marker of religious identity and difference. Paula Fredriksen insightfully captures the social function of the synagogues in the late antique city when she argues that synagogues were exclusive for Jews, but

³⁶ For emphasis on “peaceful co-existence” between Jews and Christians, see Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Archaeological Evidence for the Interaction of Jews and Non-Jews in Late Antiquity,” *AJA* 96 (1992) 101–18. A similar portrait is painted in John S. Crawford, “Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in Late-Antique Sardis,” in Steven Fine (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period* (London, 1999) 190–200.

³⁷ Augustine, *Ep.* 71.3.5. For a brief discussion of this incident, see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 284.

³⁸ *Adv. Jud.* 1.3.3. Translation taken from John Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. P. W. Harkins (Washington, D.C., 1979) 11.

³⁹ See, e.g., Paula Fredriksen, “What Parting of the Ways? Jews and Gentiles in the Ancient Mediterranean City,” in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen, 2003) 35–63.

inclusive for outsiders.⁴⁰ In many—if not most—places in the “Christian empire,” Jews and Christians interacted on a regular basis and co-existed without tension and certainly without the overt threat of verbal confrontation or physical violence.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that interactions between Jews and Christians occasionally turned violent. We have already seen the various imperial laws issued to protect Jews and synagogues from Christian aggression and expropriation. These laws indicate that there were instances of Christian violence against Jews and their synagogues.⁴¹ In addition to evidence implicit within imperial legislation, we possess literary sources documenting specific instances of Christian violence against Jews and their institutions. As a general pattern, the literary record implies that such violent outbreaks tended to take place in contexts in which imperial presence was absent, thin, or overshadowed by ecclesiastical forces, thus leaving Jews vulnerable to the more extreme factions of the local church and its bishop.

Bishops at the edges of the empire could take advantage of the weak imperial presence in their cities and, under the right circumstances, could enact violence against local Jews. A good example of how a bishop could exploit a gap in imperial power is found in the coerced “conversion” of the Jews on the Balearic island of Minorca off the coast of Spain. We learn from an encyclical letter written by bishop Severus of the Minorcan city of Jamona (*Epistula Severi*, hereafter *Ep. Sev.*) that the recently “discovered” relics of the proto-martyr Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1) were brought by “a certain priest, conspicuous for his sanctity (*presbyter quidam sanctitate praecipuus*)” to a church in another Minorcan city (Magona) in 416 CE.⁴² According to Severus,

⁴⁰ Fredriksen, “What Parting of the Ways?” 52.

⁴¹ For the classic analyses that emphasizes conflict between Jews and Christians, see J. Juster, *Les juifs dans l’empire romain*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1914); Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar-Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Oxford, 1976).

⁴² Scott Bradbury, ed. and trans., *Severus of Minorca, Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* (Oxford, 1996). All translations are taken from Bradbury’s edition unless otherwise noted. For the identification of Orosius as the

the presence of Stephen's bones so moved Christians that they were compelled to confront local Jews, with whom they had previously been in friendly relations (*Ep. Sev.* 5.1-2). In Severus's words, "[i]n every public place, we battled against the Jews over the Law; in every household, we fought for the faith" (*Ep. Sev.* 5.2). In reality, however, the power of these relics was channeled into anti-Jewish sentiment through the preaching of Severus for over a year and a half.⁴³ In early February 418 CE, Severus led an energized mob of Christians from Jamona to Magona and together they gained control over the synagogue and set it ablaze (*Ep. Sev.* 13.3–14.1).⁴⁴ Eventually—so legend has it—the entire Jewish community of Magona converted to Christianity and was forced to pay for a basilica to be built on the site of the former synagogue.

While Severus's account contains many far-fetched details, it is unlikely that it is pseudonymous or that it is a complete fabrication.⁴⁵ As Scott Bradbury has observed, not only does Severus demonstrate correct calendrical knowledge of the year 418 CE, but the mass conversion of Jews in Minorca is also attested in other (near) contemporary sources, especially a letter written by Consentius to Augustine (c. 419 CE) and *De miraculis Sancti Stephani* (c. 425 CE).⁴⁶ More recently, Ross Kraemer has supplemented Bradbury's argument for its authenticity and general historicity by pointing to the rather restrained anti-Jewish invective of the letter,

figure behind the circumlocution "a certain priest, conspicuous for his sanctity," see Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca*, 126 n. 3; Hunt, "St. Stephen in Minorca," 106.

⁴³ Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 359.

⁴⁴ While Severus fails to mention who started the fire, it seems clear that Christians were involved since they had control over it.

⁴⁵ For a rejection of the authenticity and historical reliability of *Ep. Sev.*, see most notably Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Die Judenpredigt Augustins: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der jüdisch-christlichen Beziehungen in den ersten Jahrhunderten* (Basel, 1946) 57–58; Blumenkranz, "Die jüdischen Beweisgründe im Religionsgespräch mit den Christen in den christlich-lateinischen Sonderschriften des 5. bis 11. Jahrhunderts," *ThZ* 4 (1948) 119–47, esp. 128–29.

⁴⁶ Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca*, 9–15. For the general historicity of the letter, see also Hunt, "St. Stephen in Minorca"; Josep Amengual i Batle, "Consentius/Severus de Menorca: Vint-i-Cinc Anys d'Estudis, 1975–2000," *Arxiu de Textos Catalans Antics* 20 (2001) 589–700. This letter of Consentius (plus another) was discovered along with manuscripts of Augustine's letters and published as Epistle 12* by J. Divjak, *Oeuvres des Saint Augustin* (Paris: Bibliothèque augustinienne, 1987).

which stands in marked contrast to the more vituperative anti-Jewish tractates of episcopal authors like Chrysostom.⁴⁷

The balance between church and empire in the Minorcan affair swung heavily in favor of the church. Although *Ep. Sev.* is dated in reference to the reign of Emperor Honorius and to the (second) consulship of Constantius (31.1), the account gives the impression that the imperial presence in Magona was limited to two Jews with the title *defensor*, Theodorus (*Ep. Sev.* 6) and Caecilianus (*Ep. Sev.* 19.6-8).⁴⁸ Despite Severus's focus on Theodorus, Caecilianus was in fact the senior civic magistrate in Magona in 418 CE.⁴⁹ As *defensores*, Theodorus and Caecilianus would have been charged with protecting the weak in Magona from abuse at the hands of its powerful citizens.⁵⁰ There is also a passing reference to Litorius, father of Meletius's wife Artemesia, who is said to have been a *comes* (*Ep. Sev.* 24.2). The letter's presentation of a Jewish *comes*, however, must be met with a good deal of skepticism since it was during the early fifth century CE that the empire began limiting the number of court positions for Jews.⁵¹ Moreover, the traditional associations with Artemesia's name (e.g., water and honey) and their correspondence to her conversion narrative in *Ep. Sev.* (she converts when her servant brings her water that smells and tastes like honey [24.3–11]) raise serious questions about the historicity of the entire account and, hence, makes it even more improbable that she had a Jewish father who

⁴⁷ Ross S. Kraemer, "Jewish Women's Resistance to Christianity in the Early Fifth Century: The Account of Severus, Bishop of Minorca," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009) 635–65, here 644. Kraemer questions, however, the historicity of the letter's depiction of the conversion of the Jewish women and the generally benevolent portrait of the Minorcan Christians.

⁴⁸ On the office of *defensor civitatis*, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (Baltimore, 1964) 144–45, 279–80; R. M. Frakes, "Late Roman Social Justice and Origin of the *Defensor Civitatis*," *The Classical Journal* 89 (1994) 337–48. A law issued in 409 CE states that *defensores* were required to be Christian and had to be appointed by the local Christian hierarchy (*CJ* 1.55.8). Yet it was not until 438 CE that Jews were specifically prohibited from holding the office of *defensor* (*Nov. Theod.* 3.2). The need for such a law may suggest that Minorca was not unique in having a Jewish *defensor*.

⁴⁹ Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca*, 38.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 145.

⁵¹ Hunt, "St. Stephen in Minorca," 121.

was a *comes*.⁵² In the end, whatever imperial representatives were present in Magona, they were ultimately unable to stop the mob of Christians from destroying the synagogue despite imperial legislation already in place to prevent this very kind of violence.⁵³ In fact, Severus and his followers were able to deploy a combination of physical violence, threats, and intimidation to compel the Jews to convert and to do so without facing any interference from imperial authorities.⁵⁴ Despite its general attempt to present the Christians in an innocent light, coercion is evident even in *Ep. Sev.*, which refers to a speech of Galilaeus, a Jew of considerably social standing, which he delivered before a group of Jews:

I call you all to witness that I cannot be a Jew. For on my estate I have Christian partners by whose hatred I may be killed if I wish to preserve in Judaism. Therefore, I will heed the danger to my life and will set out right now for the church to escape the death being prepared for me.⁵⁵

Evidently, imperial authorities and formal legal pronouncements offered the Jews of Magona little protection on the ground from Severus and his Christian followers.

This incident at Minorca also illustrates how local and global Christian traditions could intersect in highly specific ways, sometimes with devastating results for Jews. That these relics were used as a pretext for the persecution of Jews is hardly surprising given the emphasis on Jewish guilt for the stoning of Stephen in Acts 6:8–8:1.⁵⁶ And, indeed, there is some evidence that incidents of anti-Jewish violence linked to the arrival of Stephen’s relics occurred elsewhere

⁵² Kraemer, “Jewish Women’s Resistance,” 655–56. There is evidence for a *comes rei militaris* in Gaul between 435 and 437 CE named Litorius; see Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca*, 35. We are not persuaded, in light of the evidence presented above, that this Litorius is the same figure mentioned in *Ep. Sev.*

⁵³ Theodorus is said to have converted to Christianity, seemingly under coercion (*Ep. Sev.* 16.16, 18.18). For imperial legislation prior to 416 CE that protected Jews and synagogues from Christian violence, see *CTh* 16.8.9, 16.8.12, 6.8.20 + 2.8.26 + 8.8.8 (= Linder, *Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, 262–67, no. 40).

⁵⁴ Kraemer, “Jewish Women’s Resistance,” 649; see also Carlo Ginzburg, “The Conversion of Minorcan Jews (417–418): An Experiment in History of Historiography,” in Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl (eds.), *Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1996): 207–19.

⁵⁵ *Ep. Sev.* 19.4–5. See also *Ep. Sev.* 18.18–19, 19.6–19.

⁵⁶ On the anti-Jewish dimensions of the “martyrdom” of Stephen in the book of Acts, see Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (Oxford, 2010).

as well.⁵⁷ Yet, in each case where we hear of anti-Jewish violence or the expropriation of Jewish communal property triggered by the relics of Stephen, we find highly specific local conditions in which an episcopal figure is in a position to capitalize on the absence of empire.⁵⁸ This event—or perhaps cluster of events—demonstrates how local religious and political dynamics gave concrete expression to the trans-local circulation of traditions and objects among Christians that, under certain conditions, could have a powerful impact on Mediterranean Jewish life.

Violence against Jews was not limited to tiny islands at the edges of empire; it could also occur in traditional imperial strongholds. In 388 CE, Christians, at the instigation of the town’s bishop, burned a synagogue in Callinicum, a city on the Euphrates known for its strong defense and vibrant trade industry.⁵⁹ Upon hearing of this event from the eastern count (*comes orientis militarium partium*), Theodosius I (347–395 CE) ordered that the synagogue be rebuilt at the expense of the church and the monks responsible receive due punishment.⁶⁰

Word of the Callinicum affair and Theodosius’ reaction to it quickly reached Ambrose of Milan, who was then in Aquileia in northern Italy (*Ep.* 41.1). In what might be considered an act of hubris, Ambrose wrote a chastising letter to the emperor, condemning him for requiring the bishop to pay for the rebuilding of the synagogue (*Ep.* 40). From Ambrose’s perspective, by asking the bishop to pay for the synagogue, Theodosius was in fact demanding that the bishop

⁵⁷ According to *Chron. Ed.* 1.6.51, Rabbula, bishop of Edessa, converted a synagogue in Edessa into the Church of St. Stephen under orders from Theodosius II, though, given the limited and questionable evidence for this event, one ought to approach this claim of the imperial sponsorship with a heavy dose of skepticism. It has been suggested that Stephen’s relics provided a pretext for the expropriation of the synagogue in Edessa similar to what occurred in Minorca; see Hans J. W. Drijvers “The Protonike Legend, the *Doctrina Addai*, and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997) 298–315, following E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, A. D. 312–460* (Oxford, 1982) 212–13.

⁵⁸ Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca*, 23.

⁵⁹ The primary source for the destruction of the synagogue at Callinicum is Ambrose, *Eps.* 40 and 41. Evidently based on a misreading of Ambrose’s *Ep.* 40.16, Paulinus conflated the burning of the synagogue at Callinicum with the destruction of a Valentinian chapel in Syria (*Vit. Ambr.* 7 [22.1]). For analysis of Ambrose’s letters, see Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994) 301.

⁶⁰ On the use of the title *comes orientis militarium partium* in Ambrose’s letter, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 298 n. 26.

either follow orders, whereby he would betray his Christian faith and become an apostate, or reject the imperial imperative and, hence, run the risk of becoming a martyr (*Ep.* 40.7). Further complicating matters, Ambrose's earlier intervention had already prompted Theodosius to exempt the bishop of Callinicum from paying for the rebuilding of the synagogue.⁶¹ Nevertheless, at least from Ambrose's perspective, this exemption was insufficient, as Theodosius had simply transferred the financial—and theological—burden to the *comes orientis* (*Ep.* 40.9).⁶² Ambrose confronted the emperor directly in a sermon delivered in the presence of the emperor (*Ep.* 41.2–26).⁶³ Theodosius finally consented to drop any and all compulsory retribution when Ambrose refused to allow him to celebrate the Eucharist until he had withdrawn all previous orders concerning Callinicum.

The despoliation of the synagogue at Callinicum offers important insight into the shifting conjunction of Christianity and the Roman Empire and its impact on the empire's Jews.⁶⁴ Like the case of Minorca, the event provides a clear example of the kinds of violent actions that were possible when and where the local imperial presence was overshadowed by (or embodied in) the town's bishop. Indeed, the immediate imperial action taken was at the intermediary level (the eastern count) and in the form of a letter written to the emperor *ex post facto*. What is more, the count's motivations for involving the emperor in this affair are unclear. Was his intention to demand justice on behalf of the Jews or to assuage imperial wrath against the local Christians?⁶⁵ In either case, what is clear is that the Jews of Callinicum were very much at the mercy of the city's bishop, with little immediate support from external imperial forces.

⁶¹ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 300.

⁶² McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 300–301.

⁶³ For analysis of Ambrose's rhetoric, see Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia, 2009) 81–107.

⁶⁴ It is possible that Ambrose used the affair at Callinicum in part as a pretext for persuading the emperor to halt the assignment of municipal duties imposed on presbyters and deacons in Italy (*Ep.* 40.29). See McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 302.

⁶⁵ McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 299 n. 27.

At an empire-wide level, the destruction of the synagogue at Callinicum and the events that ensued epitomize the tenuous position of the Jews in the dynamic relationship between the global institutions of church and empire. While Theodosius's initial stance was to demand restitution from Christians on behalf of the Jews for the destruction of their synagogue, he was forced by a powerful bishop from a different region to rescind his order, thus momentarily aligning church and empire to powerful effect. But Theodosius's approach to the empire's role in Jewish-Christian disputes was to change yet again. In a law issued just five years after the despoliation of the synagogue at Callinicum, the same Theodosius—perhaps with the experience of Callinicum in mind—ordered that “those who presume to commit illegal deeds under the name of the Christian religion and attempt to destroy and despoil synagogues” ought to be punished (*CTh* 16.8.9). Thus, over the course of only half a decade and under the rule of a single emperor, the legislative and administrative map for the conjunction of empire, Judaism, and Christianity was drawn in multiple—and, at times, contradictory—ways.

The relationship of a local Jewish community to imperial and ecclesiastical forces took on yet a different configuration in the great urban center of Alexandria in the early fifth century CE. In 415 CE, Cyril bishop of Alexandria expelled the Jews from the city against the wishes of the augustal prefect, Orestes.⁶⁶ That Cyril removed *all* Jews from the city has been appropriately questioned, given the apparent size of the Jewish population in Alexandria and their necessary participation, *inter alia*, in the shipping industry.⁶⁷ It is unlikely, however, that Socrates invented out of whole cloth Cyril's act of violence against the Alexandrian Jews. This conflict between

⁶⁶ Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. eccl.* vii. 13. 15. Cf. John of Nikiu, *Chron.* 84.89–99. See Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology* (New Haven, 1971) 54–68; Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore, 1997) 295–316; Victor Tcherikover and Alexander Fuks, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957–63) 1:98–101.

⁶⁷ E.g., Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, 57. See also *CTh* 13.5.18.

Cyril and Orestes was a reflex of the broader power struggle in Alexandria between bishops and imperial authorities. As Socrates notes, “now Orestes had long regarded with jealousy the growing power of the bishops, because they encroached on the jurisdiction of the authorities appointed by the emperor.”⁶⁸

Although the primary sources for the expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria are so biased in favor of Cyril that it is difficult to reconstruct its underlying causes, it is possible, as Robert Wilken has suggested, that Cyril’s actions were ultimately precipitated by his anti-Jewish reading of the Bible.⁶⁹ Whether or not such a hermeneutical explanation sufficiently explains the events in Alexandria, it is abundantly clear that Orestes’ influence over Alexandrian life was limited in so far as he could not curb the anti-Jewish inclinations of the Alexandrian bishop.⁷⁰

Christopher Haas aptly sums up the situation:

Given the instability of imperial administration during 414 and the strong line taken against dissenters by 415, it is not surprising that Cyril should have acted confidently in his dealings with Alexandria’s Jews and pagans. This also goes a long way toward explaining the ineffectiveness of the augustal prefect, Orestes.⁷¹

The “instability” in the imperial administration of the city may explain why there was apparently no imperial response to the letters written by either Orestes or Cyril.⁷² In this case, the fate of the Jews depended entirely on a local struggle between the imperial and ecclesiastical forces on the ground in Alexandria. Unfortunately for the Jews, the latter prevailed and (probably) a significant contingent of the Jewish population was expelled from the city. The expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria during the bishopric of Cyril thus demonstrates that, even in regions with

⁶⁸ Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. eccl.* 7.13. Translation taken from A. C. Zenos, trans., *Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History*, NPNF 2.2 (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957) 159.

⁶⁹ Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, 61, followed by Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 300–301.

⁷⁰ Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 302; Tcherikover and Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 98. Cyril’s political shrewdness can also be seen in his subsequent dealings with the emperor over the Nestorian controversy; see Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 74–111.

⁷¹ Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 302.

⁷² Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. eccl.* 7.13.18–19. On the lack of imperial response to these letters, see Millar, *Greek Roman Empire*, 127.

traditionally strong ties to the empire, bishops could exploit momentary weaknesses in the central imperial administration to circumvent local authorities and to enact punishments against the Jews.

Conclusion

Certain patterns have emerged from these three instances of Christian aggression or violence against Jews in the Roman Empire of late antiquity. In each case, local bishops were the primary players in inflicting violence against the local Jewish community with which they were in contact. Whether they were completely or mostly unencumbered by imperial authorities (Stephen of Minorca and the bishop of Callinicum) or had to square off against local officials (Cyril of Alexandria), bishops had the potential to reshape the relationship of Jews to both their immediate urban context as well as to the larger structures of empire. Yet even Jews who lived in cities with traditional and significant ties to the empire could not reliably depend on the protective strength of local or regional imperial institutions. The most powerful bishops, such as Ambrose or Cyril, could even compel emperors to change course on violence against Jews—albeit temporarily—or expel the Jews against the wishes of the local imperial representative.

The circumstances at Minorca, Callinicum, and Alexandria are also consistent with the basic pattern presented in legal texts of imperial protection of Jews against Christian violence. Despite the occasional restrictive law, the empire offered a great deal of protection to the Jews against those Christians bent on confrontation. The reason behind this largely positive approach to the Jews is not clear. The assessment offered several decades ago by Bernard Bachrach remains the most plausible: “an anti-Jewish policy was not pursued during the first century and a half following the Edict of Toleration because the imperial government had a sound

understanding of political realities. It saw the potential cost, in terms of social dislocation, economic decline, and military conflict, that the Jewish *gens* could impose if it were attacked.”⁷³ But the empire’s capacity to circumscribe and manage the confrontational impulses within Christian communities was not the same everywhere and at all times. The power of the empire was limited or overshadowed by the church in many regions, particularly at the “edges” of the empire, where local bishops exerted considerable formal and persuasive power. Indeed, Stephen and his episcopal impresario had little in their way when they impelled a group of Christians to march against the Jewish community of Magona in a relatively obscure corner of the Mediterranean world.

These case-studies make it clear that the Christianization of the Roman Empire did not entail a neat and consistent alignment of the institutions of church and state. In fact, Jewish life was often framed by the complex negotiations of church and state at both the local and global levels. This highly variable and ever-shifting imperial–ecclesiastical arrangement helps explain why we find evidence of both long-standing continuities in Jewish life throughout the history of the Roman Empire and sudden and significant changes brought on by the Christianization of that empire in the course of long fifth century.

⁷³ Bernard S. Bachrach, “The Jewish Community of the Later Roman Empire as Seen in the *Codex Theodosianus*,” in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds.), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us”: Christians, Jews, and “Others” in Late Antiquity* (Chico, Calif., 1985) 399–421, here 421.