

Dem Ansehen des Fachs in einer breiteren Öffentlichkeit wurde damit zweifellos ein guter Dienst erwiesen.

Johannes Heinrichs

Universität zu Köln

Severus of Minorca: *Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*, edited and translated by Scott Bradbury, Oxford Early Christian Texts, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. x + 144 pp. ISBN 0-19-826764-9.

*The Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* is a strange and difficult document. It purports to offer, in the form of a letter circulated by Severus, Bishop of Minorca, an account of the miraculous conversion of the Jews of that island, numbering, according to the text, some 540 in all, to Christianity in the year 418. If genuine, it will have been written very shortly after the events described in it, by one of the leading actors in them. One of its aims will have been to publicize those events, and the role in them played by the bishop himself. The *Letter* seems to have circulated in the company of other texts, largely hagiographical in character, and it has come, because of that and because it contains some miraculous narrative elements, to share in the reputation that these have.

The *Letter* is strange and difficult largely because of the nature of the events which it describes, and because of the question how far it may contain authentic accounts of genuine events. The existence of a Jewish community on Minorca in the early fifth century need not be altogether implausible. It is nonetheless not attested other than in this text and the account here thus raises questions: if there was a Jewish community there at this time, what does this indicate, what may it indicate, about the nature of the Jewish Diaspora in the western Mediterranean in the fourth and fifth centuries? What of the size and distribution of such communities? What of their social and legal status, in real rather than purely theoretical, terms? What of the nature of their religious and cultural existences? And beyond all of this, what of the apparently great size of the community? That there should have been so many as 540 Jews, in a place like Minorca, at any period, but especially in the early fifth century, surely stretches the limits of even a hagiographer's imagination.

Bernhard Blumenkranz, the most serious scholar to have treated of the *Letter* in the past, came to the – not wholly unreasonable – conclusion that it was a literary invention, intended to promote the faith of believers rather than to advance the conversion of Jews. Most of his predecessors had viewed the text in similar fashion. The conclusion that followed from this was that we should not expect to be able to use the text as a source for real events on Minorca in 418, for authentic information about the survival and fate of Jewish communities all over the lands of the western Empire in its later stages, or even about specific details of the Christian victory against the Jews at this time. At best, it appeared, the text might illuminate our impressions about the last of these questions, and offer confirmation of the ways in which the Church sought much later to justify, by hagiographical means, its war against the Jews. But for hard facts, it seemed, we should look elsewhere.

Now, for the first time since Baronius in the sixteenth century, Scott Bradbury has given us a useful edition and translation of this work, and in addition has provided it

with an extensive introduction and notes. The result is two-fold. Not only does he make this important text easily available; that is a benefit, partly because of the nature of the text in itself. It is a highly readable and lively account, and, whatever we make of the questions of authenticity, the text itself is one that offers plenty of material about matters going far beyond the conversion of the Jews of Minorca. It deserves the wider audience which this edition is certain to give it. But more than this, and much more importantly, Bradbury offers us, in the introduction, a highly persuasive set of arguments in favour of the view that the text is indeed by Severus himself, and, still more significantly, that it is by and large a truthful account of genuine occurrences, written, as it tells us, in the immediate aftermath of the events described in it. Bradbury examines the arguments against authenticity put forward by Blumenkranz and finds them all individually flawed and collectively unimpressive. Beyond this, he also shows that we actually have two contemporary references to the events described in the text and to the writing of the text itself. One of these references was known long ago, but the other comes from the recently discovered corpus of new letters of Augustine. It is not by Augustine himself but by one of his correspondents, and it belongs to the immediate aftermath of the events, still before the writing of the *Letter* by the Bishop. There seems to be no good reason to reject Bradbury's conclusion that the text is what it claims to be.

This, if it is correct, is a very important and useful conclusion at which to arrive. It offers support for those who would see the survival at least into the fifth century of large and flourishing communities of Jews in various parts of the western Mediterranean basin. It suggests that some at least of these will have housed learned Jews involved actively in their internal cultural life. It offers testimony to religious life of a rich and varied sort among these Jews. And it points above all to contacts between such Jews and others elsewhere, as well as between Jews and their neighbours.

At the same time, such a view is not without difficulties. We should still like to know more about the provenance of such large numbers of Jews, and of the provenance of such communities in what is, after all, a fairly out of the way island. Minorca does lie on Mediterranean trade and shipping routes, but there are other places in that sea basin that might appear to offer more attractions. Our knowledge of Jews in the Iberian peninsula at this time is far greater, yet it does not seem to point to large numbers of Jews or to flourishing communities with a diverse and active religious and cultural life. It does not seem possible to ascribe some special character, suitable to the hagiographical context, to the number 540, and we are bound to ask where the number is taken from.

These are essentially, however, problems with the historical environment of the text, rather than with the text itself, and they are provoked by the solid grounds that we now have for accepting the text as genuine and as offering generally authentic information about real events. The exceedingly little knowledge that we have of such communities in this period has seemed to some in the past to indicate that such communities were simply not there, or very insignificant. For others, such information seemed to be the tip of a large iceberg for which there was no real evidence now available. It is possible that here in this text, and in Bradbury's judicious presentation and discussion of it, we now have at least some of the evidence.