

Chapter Eighteen

Judaism in Late Antiquity (ca. 250 to 565)

A problem of sources

We have little information about Judaeans in Late Antiquity. The Talmudic *gemara* gives us in minute detail - whether reliable or not - the debates of the *'amora'im* about the Mishnah compiled by Rabbi Judah. But about activities and situations of the several million Judaeans in the Roman and the Sassanid empires, as well as in more out-of-the-way places, these rabbinic sources say little or nothing. Whatever may have been written in Greek by Judaeans in the Hellenistic Diaspora disappeared without a trace. Christian writers from the third through the sixth century refer often to Judaeans, almost always to disparage them. These writers tell us occasionally about the repression or harassment of Judaeans, but otherwise have more to say about the Judaeans of Biblical times than about their own contemporaries. Other textual evidence for the fourth and early fifth centuries comes from Book 16 of the Theodosian Code. Published in 438, the Theodosian Code is a compilation of the *edicta* and *constitutiones* issued by the emperors from Constantine through Theodosius II, and 34 of the edicts and constitutions in Book 16 pertain to Judaeans.¹ A very welcome light on our subject has been shed by archaeological excavations, especially in ancient Palestine but also in the Greco-Roman Diaspora.² What Israeli archaeologists have discovered in Galilee and the Golan Heights gives us more information - about both the private lives and the synagogues of Judaeans in Late Antiquity - than was available a generation ago. But much more remains unknown.

Judaism among the Berber tribes of North Africa

Among the most obscure of the Judaeans of Late Antiquity are the Berbers of North Africa. Until the middle of the twentieth century Judaeans in North Africa were a minority of considerable size in otherwise Muslim lands. For most of these Judaeans it was an article of faith that they were descended from ancient Judahites: when King Nebuchadnezzar was preparing to attack Jerusalem in 587 BC, they believed, many Judahites fled to North Africa. No evidence, whether archaeological or textual, supports this myth and critical historians are generally convinced that the large Jewish Diaspora in North Africa was primarily the result of widespread proselytizing.

Proselytizing certainly accounted for the Judaizing of a number of Berber-speaking tribes in what is today northern Libya, Tunisia, northern Algeria, and Morocco.³ This area has been mostly Muslim for the last thousand years, and in Arabic is called the *maghreb* ("the west"). Until the Romans began planting colonies in North Africa the only large cities here were Cyrene and Carthage. As we have seen, during the first four centuries after Alexander the Great Judaism spread dramatically in Egypt and North Africa, and by the second century CE almost half the population of Cyrenaica was Judaeans. The appeal of Judaism evidently extended into the countryside, where Berber-speaking nomads pastured their sheep and goats, and at least a few

Berber tribes converted to Judaism.

In the massacres of 115-117 CE the Judaeans of Cyrene were annihilated, but in cities further to the west Jewish minorities continued past the collapse of the western Roman empire. The Vandal warlords who took over North Africa in the fifth century were Christian, but relatively tolerant of their Jewish subjects. The Byzantine emperor Justinian was not, and in the middle decades of the sixth century orthodox Christians were encouraged to appropriate or destroy Jewish synagogues. Urban Judaism in North Africa was much reduced, but Justinian could not coerce the nomadic, Berber-speaking tribes in the countryside to accept Christianity. For a time, therefore, the tribes accounted for a relatively high proportion of Judaeans in North Africa. Ibn Khaldun reports that on the eve of the Muslim invasion of North Africa (in the seventh century) several Berber tribes were Judaeans, especially along the Atlas mountain chain in the western *maghreb*.⁴

After the Muslim conquests Judaism in North Africa fared much better than it had under Christian rulers. Because the Muslims were fierce in their ambition to exterminate polytheism, the Berber tribes that were still polytheistic were forced to convert to one of the monotheistic religions: most of them chose Islam, but the rest adopted Judaism. By the end of the first millennium the number of Judaeans in North Africa had increased, while Christianity had virtually disappeared.

As elsewhere, Judaeans in North Africa were protected by the Muslim rulers, but the protection applied only to those Judaeans - almost all of them urban - who agreed to surrender their weapons. Although the Judaeans would not and did not disarm, they were for a long time regarded by the Muslims as allies. By the eleventh century relations were more hostile. Far to the west, near what is now the city of Marrakech, the circumstances of the Judaeans declined after 1059, when rigorous Muslims - the Almoravids - were victorious at the battle of Aghmat.⁵ Judaeans nevertheless continued to be an important minority in North Africa, especially among the Berber-speaking population. Even in the early twentieth century, some two hundred thousand Moroccans still identified themselves as Jewish, and the number of Jewish Algerians and Tunisians was also considerable. After the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 the Jewish minority in many North Africa communities came under attack from the Muslim majority, and most of the Judaeans of the *maghreb* - whether their preferred language was Berber or Arabic - emigrated to Israel.

Judaism in ancient Yemen

Not quite so obscure as the Judaeans of ancient Yemen are the Judaeans of ancient Yemen. This relatively prosperous land, at the southwestern tip of the Arabian peninsula, was called Arabia the Blessed by the Greeks and Romans because it was the source of frankincense, myrrh, and highly valued spices.⁶ Its natives called the leading kingdom Saba, and in the Hebrew Bible it is called Sheba. In the third or fourth century CE the kingdom of Saba was crowded aside by the more southerly kingdom of Himyar, and until the early sixth century Himyarite kings kept control of all that is today Yemen. Although for the last thousand years the language of Yemen has been Arabic, under the ancient Sabaean and Himyarite kings the people of southwestern

Arabia spoke the Sabaean language. Sabaean was part of the South Semitic language group and was closely related to the Ge'ez and Amharic languages of Ethiopia. From the tip of Yemen's coast Africa is visible, just across the Bab al-Mandab straits, and the Ethiopic kingdom of Aksum was always in close contact - whether in peace or in war - with the Sabaean and Himyarite kings. In contrast to its linguistic affinity with the Ethiopian dialects, the Sabaean language had only remote and tenuous connections to Hebrew and Arabic.

From antiquity until the twentieth century Judaism was the religion of many Yemenites. Although, as we shall presently see, there is much controversy about how and when Judaism came to southwestern Arabia, its arrival seems to fall during the Himyarite period of Late Antiquity. As the gods were failing in the Mediterranean world, that is, so were they also losing credibility in ancient Yemen. Ibn Ishaq, the eighth-century biographer of Muhammad, places the conversion from polytheism to Judaism in the reign of the Himyarite king Tibān As'ad Abū Karib (ca. 383-433). The legend told by Ibn Ishaq was evidently a favorite at Medina (Yathrib) and is of course fabulous. When Abū Karib and the Himyarites made war on Yathrib, so the story goes, the Judaeans of Yathrib converted the king to Judaism. Returning to his kingdom, Abū Karib brought with him two rabbis in order to demonstrate to all the Himyarites the power of God, the Judaeans' Adonai. Abū Karib set up an ordeal of fire to test the two rabbis against the Himyarites' pagan priests. In the ordeal the pagan priests and their images were burnt to cinders, "but the two rabbis came out with their sacred books, sweating profusely but otherwise unharmed. Thereupon the Himyarites accepted the king's religion. Such was the origin of Judaism in the Yaman."⁷

The chronology indicated by the legend seems to be roughly correct. Archaeologists have found that Himyarite graves from the later fourth and the fifth centuries show a sharp decline of grave goods, suggesting a major change in beliefs about the afterlife. Himyarite inscriptions, which previously had been polytheistic, show a similarly drastic shift: "References to the pagan deities of the ancient tradition disappeared almost completely in favour of mention of the one unique God, referred to as 'the merciful' or simply as 'God' and usually qualified as 'Lord of Heaven.'"⁸

The skeptical reader, who doubts the story of the rabbis' miraculous escape from the fire, must surmise how in fact the Himyarites were converted to Judaism. We have seen that in Ethiopia (Abyssinia) many people had converted to Judaism at an early date. It is quite likely that for commercial or military reasons a number of Judaeans had at some time come to San'a, the Himyarites' largest city, and that some of the more curious natives were attracted to the Judaeans' worship, to monotheism, and to the promise of Heaven for those who abandoned idols and worshiped Adonai. The mass conversion of the Himyarites, however, evidently followed the decision of their king (very likely Abū Karib, at the end of the fourth century) to adopt Judaism. The fourth century was the time for kings to make such decisions for their kingdoms. At the beginning of the fourth century the Armenian king, Trdat the Great, who was under pressure from the Sassanids to make Zoroastrianism the religion of Armenia, chose instead to adopt Christianity for himself and his subjects. Constantine's conversion followed in 312. With the Roman empire now friendly to Christianity, the province of Egypt became overwhelmingly and stridently Christian. Around the middle of the fourth century Ezana, king

of Ethiopia, followed suit and established Christianity as the religion of his kingdom. The kingdom of Himyar could not have been unmoved by the prevalence of both Christianity and Judaism across the straits of Bab al-Mandab. The era of the gods, the idols, was clearly over and people everywhere were now worshipping God. Although some of his subjects did become Christian, for one reason or another the Himyarite king chose to make his kingdom Judaeans. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that his decision was in some way affected by the fact that Ethiopia, Himyar's great rival, had recently become Christian.

So far as Ibn Ishaq and other Muslim sources knew, and as the Yemenite Judaeans' own myths assume, in Late Antiquity the entire population of the Himyarite kingdom was Judaeans. This is especially remarkable because a Judaeans kingdom anywhere was an anomaly. After the death of Agrippa II in the first century CE and Trajan's annexation of Adiabene, the only known Judaeans kingdom other than the Himyarite is the equally obscure kingdom of the Khazars in the Eurasian steppe. The Himyarite kingdom was supposed to have been mighty. The Yemenite Judaeans claim that in the seventh century their ancestors allied with Muhammad and that by slaying 21,000 heathen warriors they made it possible for Muhammad to eliminate idolatry from all of southern Arabia.

Judaism in Yemen may have been rabbinic from the outset, and certainly was rabbinic by the tenth century, to which the earliest Jewish manuscripts from Yemen are dated. Today the Hebrew spoken by Yemenite rabbis is widely considered the most faithful to the ancient pronunciation of Hebrew. In addition to their mastery of Hebrew, the Yemenite rabbis also made regular use of the Onqelos targum - an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible - in their synagogue services. After the spread of Islam (and of the Arabic language) Judaism in Yemen gradually dwindled to a minority religion. It nevertheless remained vigorous until the early twentieth century, when it was repressed by the ruler, Imam Yahya. By 1914 Yahya's policies had resulted in the emigration to Palestine of several thousand Yemenite Judaeans. In the first three years after the 1948 creation of the State of Israel most of the remaining Judaeans of Yemen - some fifty thousand - were brought to the new nation by sea and air (the Israeli operation was code-named Magic Carpet).

Because popular Jewish ideology has traditionally identified "pure Jews" as the descendants of Judah or one of the eleven other mythical sons of Jacob (Israel), Yemenite Judaeans have for many centuries identified themselves as descended from the Biblical Judahites or Israelites. The need to do so has become especially urgent in light of Zionism's assumption that the Jewish immigration to Israel in the twentieth century was an "in-gathering of exiles." According to one of the Judaeans Yemenites' myths, their ancestors came out of Egypt with Moses, but turned south to Yemen instead of following the main group into Canaan. Another myth has them descended from Israelites whom Solomon sent to escort the queen of Sheba back to her native land, after her visit to Jerusalem. As a third myth has it, after Jeremiah prophesied that the city of Jerusalem was about to be destroyed by Nechuchadnezzar, 75,000 Judahite men - including many priests and Levites - fled from Jerusalem with their families and came to Yemen. Most interesting of all is the myth that long ago a secret underground passage ran from Jerusalem to Mount Nukum, which lies just to the east of the capital city of San'a.⁹

Since the nineteenth century critical historians have recognized these traditions as aetiological myths, and have seen the Judaeans of Yemen as largely the descendants of Sabaean and Himyarite proselytes. More recently, physical evidence based on blood-groups and on DNA has left little doubt that “the Jews” of Yemen are descended from more or less the same population as are the Muslims of Yemen. As often happens, however, in the public arena ideology trumps science. Much public opinion in Israel, heartened by nationalistic scholarship, is that the massive immigration from Yemen in the late 1940s brought “pure Jews” to the State of Israel.¹⁰

Judaism in the Roman empire from Decius to Constantine

In the middle of the third century, when Decius and Valerian were making the first imperial effort to stamp out New Covenant Christianity, Judaism was prospering both in the Roman empire (especially its eastern provinces) and in Sassanid Mesopotamia. The Judaism that archaeologists have found was not rabbinic Judaism, although the nominal head of the Judaeans was the *nasi* or patriarch of the rabbinic academy in Galilee. In Decius’s and Valerian’s day this was Judah II, who in 230 inherited the leadership of the rabbinic school at Sepphoris and held it until his death in 286. During his long tenure of the patriarchate, Judah II (also known as Judah Nessiah) moved the school and court to Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, where it was to stay throughout Late Antiquity. The patriarch’s authority at the court and school and among rabbis elsewhere was great, but in the third century the rabbis were still of only marginal importance in Judaism: in the Hellenistic Diaspora, in Mesopotamia, and even in Galilee itself the typical synagogue was unconcerned about the strictures of the oral *torah*. Nevertheless, Judah II exerted some control over all of Judaism because it was the patriarch who regulated the calendar and determined the dates of the major festivals.

Until Constantine declared himself a Christian, the prospects for Judaism’s growth were better than ever. The messianic ardor of an earlier period had cooled, and the Hellenistic synagogues - as the inscriptions from Anatolian Aphrodisias show - were continuing to attract a considerable number of Gentiles, now including men of the governing class. A monotheistic religion, unencumbered by imperial persecutions, Judaism ca. 250 CE may once again have counted more than five million adherents, and seems to have been integrated into the municipal life of many eastern cities. In Palestine the Hellenization of the Judaeans cities and villages in the third and fourth centuries is remarkable: even in Sepphoris and Tiberias, the cities of the rabbinic academy, the wealthier Judaeans arranged and decorated their houses in the same way that well-to-do Gentiles did. Except for the few who attempted to follow the commandments of the rabbis, Judaeans in the third and fourth century seem to have taken their religion lightly and must have been difficult to distinguish from their Hellenic neighbors.¹¹ A pagan who at that time was tiring of the gods and inclining toward worship of God would have found Hellenistic Judaism less alien and more attractive than Christianity.

Apparently Judaeans were not adversely affected by the empire-wide persecutions of the Christians launched by Decius (249-251) and Valerian (especially 257-260). Our evidence, unfortunately, is of the negative sort: none of our sources, whether rabbinic, Christian or pagan, mention any imperial action taken against Judaeans during these persecutions. That suggests

that Decius must have exempted the Judaeans when he issued his edict that all subjects obtain a *libellus* certifying that they had participated in sacrifices to the traditional gods. Valerian's persecution was aimed directly at the Christian clergy, and so would not have endangered Judaeans.

For the "Great Persecution" of Christians conducted by Diocletian, Galerius and Maximinus Daia from 303 until 311, a single piece of positive evidence survives. According to a tractate in the Yerushalmi Talmud, "When Diocletian arrived in Palestine, he commanded all nations, with the exception of the Jews, to pour libations to idols."¹² The date of this imperial edict would have been 303 or 304. As Smallwood observes, had Diocletian attempted to force the Judaeans to join in libations to the gods the rabbis would certainly have remembered the ordeal, and we may therefore accept their recollection that Diocletian specifically excused Judaeans from his general order.

The official ban on proselytizing to Judaism had probably not been revoked, but its enforcement must have been rare since proselytes were still joining the synagogues when Constantine came to power. The empire-wide persecutions of Christians, together with the military and economic disasters besetting the empire, may in fact have increased the rate of conversion to Judaism. In any case, during the second half of the third century Hellenistic Judaism entered a period of remarkable prosperity.

The construction of synagogues after ca. 250 CE: Galilee and the Golan Heights

We have seen that for a long time neither Judaeans nor Christians worshiped in purpose-built structures. Instead, they purchased ordinary houses and - usually by removing interior walls - adapted them for use as religious assembly halls. But we have also seen that in the third century Judaeans began constructing buildings designed specifically as synagogues. By the end of the third century some of these synagogues were quite impressive. In ancient Palestine this new enthusiasm for building synagogues is especially well documented, thanks to excavations conducted by Israeli archaeologists over the last forty years. Dozens of ancient synagogues have been discovered, a few in southern Palestine but most of them in Galilee or in the Golan Heights. Almost all of the synagogues appear to have been established after ca. 250 CE, with construction being most vigorous in the fourth century.¹³

Although synagogues were ultimately meant for the worship of God, the immediate focus of worship was the Torah. Reverence for the holy books in Judaism was in contrast to the secondary position of the Bible in Christian churches (until the Protestant Reformation, the sacraments were the essence of Christian worship and the congregation steadily faced the altar, upon which the priest performed the sacrament of the Eucharist). In every synagogue the scrolls of the Tanakh were kept in a special place. In smaller synagogues the "Torah shrine" was only a closet or even a moveable cabinet against the wall facing Jerusalem. In purpose-built synagogues, however, the Jerusalem wall was typically constructed so as to include a recess or niche to serve as a Torah shrine. Whatever its physical appearance and dimensions, the shrine and its contents were the most sacred part of a synagogue, and were the focus of the congregation. The opening of the shrine, the extraction of a Torah scroll, and the reading of a

passage from the scroll were the culmination of synagogue worship.

What Israeli archaeologists have found in their excavation of ancient synagogues shows that by the third and fourth century Hellenization had deeply affected Judaeans in Palestine. The material evidence has thus greatly changed scholars' understanding of Late Antique Judaism, which until the 1960s had been based largely on literary - especially Talmudic - sources. The inscriptions found in the synagogues of third- and fourth-century Palestine are more often in Greek than in Aramaic, and Hebrew inscriptions or even Hebrew words are very rare.¹⁴ Many of these Palestinian congregations chose to decorate their buildings with mosaics displaying figures, both human and animal. At Gaza a sixth-century synagogue mosaic portrayed a young man playing his harp to a circle of fascinated animals. The figure looked very much like the Greek Orpheus but an inscription in Hebrew letters (by the sixth century the use of Hebrew was spreading rapidly) identified him as King David.¹⁵

Far the most impressive of the known Palestinian synagogues is the one at Capernaum, the city in which Jesus *Nazoraios* once lived, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.¹⁶ Built of white limestone, the Capernaum synagogue towered over and stood out from the city's houses, most of which were small and stood on foundations of gray basalt.¹⁷ The synagogue's assembly hall measured 20.5 x 18.5 m and had an interior colonnade (with Corinthian capitals) to support the roof over so large a room. The hall was entered from a fore-court of almost the same spacious dimensions. Geometric and animal figures (including eagles) were carved in relief in the limestone walls. One inscription in Greek and another in Aramaic honored the donors who paid for two of the columns. Discovered in the nineteenth century, the Capernaum synagogue was partially reconstructed in 1926 and the evidence then available suggested that the synagogue was built in the second or third century CE. However, excavations conducted by the Franciscan Fathers from 1968 to 1982 produced evidence that the building was erected no earlier than the fourth century and perhaps as late as the fifth.

Astrology, Adonai, and Sol Invictus

Initially surprising are the zodiac mosaics that Israeli archaeologists have discovered in synagogues built in Late Antiquity.¹⁸ The mosaics, regularly located in the center of the floor of the assembly hall, feature a square within which are two concentric circles. At the four corners of the square are four female figures, representing the four seasons of the year. The larger of the two concentric circles within the square is made up of twelve zones, displaying the twelve signs of the zodiac. In the smaller circle, from which the twelve zodiacal zones radiate, is the frontal image of a sun god, driving his four-horse chariot through the skies. Although the deity portrayed can hardly be anyone other than Adonai, he looks very much like the Greek Helios or - more strikingly - the Latin Sol Invictus ("the Unconquered Sun"). All of this celestial imagery was accompanied by representations of implements traditional in Judaism: mosaics of the *shofar* (ram's horn), the incense shovel, the *menorah*, and other religious items.

Zodiacal mosaics have thus far been found in seven synagogues in Galilee and the Golan Heights. The earliest of these synagogues dates from the fourth century and the latest from the early sixth century (ca. 520). Although it is likely that zodiac mosaics were also laid in Diaspora

synagogues, none has yet been found.

Rachel Hachlili, who made a study of the zodiac mosaics, concluded “that the Jewish zodiacal panel is a liturgical calendar.” Adverting to the pilgrim feasts and other festivals that had once been celebrated at the Jerusalem temple, Hachlili suggested that “[w]hen the synagogue replaced the Temple, the annual ritual acts, performed by the priests, were represented symbolically in synagogue art.”¹⁹ Although Hachlili may be correct that the mosaics were meant indirectly to recall the holy days appropriate to each season, that explains neither the zodiacal signs nor the central figure. A more obvious explanation of the mosaic would be that before Judaism’s turn to the Talmuds, in the sixth and seventh century, astrology was highly esteemed in the synagogues. The great majority of people in the Roman empire - from the uneducated to philosophers and emperors - took astrology very seriously and Judaeans seem to have been no exception. Although the Pharisees were not interested in the stars, written evidence suggests that many rank-and-file Judaeans were attracted to astrology as early as the first century BC.²⁰ By the third and fourth centuries Judaeans were in some quarters regarded as superb astrologers, not much inferior to “Chaldaeans.” Firmicus Maternus, writing his lengthy treatise on astrology early in the fourth century, supposed that Abraham was one of the founders of astrology. It has been suggested by Louis Feldman that one of the reasons that the ancient synagogues were so successful in attracting proselytes was the high reputation of Jewish astrologers.²¹ If Feldman is correct, we need not be surprised that in Late Antiquity synagogues made so prominent a display of the zodiac. After 312 Judaeans and Christians were in strenuous competition for proselytes from paganism, and by advertising the Jewish astrological tradition the synagogues would have been more appealing to star-watching pagans than were the churches (in none of the churches of Late Antiquity has a representation of the zodiac been found).

Let us now consider the central figure in the zodiacal mosaics: Adonai as sun god in his chariot. Here Hachlili made the important observation that in the earliest of the mosaics, in a fourth-century synagogue at Hammath Tiberias in Galilee, the deity “has all the attributes of *Sol invictus*.”²² It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the Judaeans’ decision to portray Adonai as Sol Invictus was somehow related to the elevation of that god by the Roman emperors in the late third and early fourth century. Aurelian and especially Diocletian and his tetrarchy were keen to make Sol Invictus the principal and in fact the universal god of the Roman empire. As we have seen, Diocletian specifically exempted the Judaeans from worshiping “the gods,” while Christians received no exemption and were punished in the Great Persecution of 303-311. Judaeans may have gratified Diocletian and his colleagues by portraying Adonai with the attributes of Sol Invictus, and may have continued the practice long after Constantine came to power and began demoting Sol Invictus from his preeminent position.²³

Synagogues in the Diaspora

Evidence continues to accumulate that in the Diaspora also synagogues became larger and finer during the late third and the fourth centuries. Most recent (October of 2009) are press reports that remains of a third-century synagogue have been found at Demre, overlooking the Mediterranean coast of southwestern Turkey.²⁴ In 1981 archaeologists discovered the beautiful synagogue at Philippopolis (Plovdiv, in Bulgaria), described toward the end of Chapter 14. The

Philippopolis synagogue must have been built before 249 because it seems to have sustained some damage from the Gothic raids of 249-51.²⁵ After the city's recovery generous benefactions made possible the restoration of the synagogue.

Another third-century synagogue uncovered by archaeologists stood at Stobi, now in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.²⁶ A column from the synagogue bore a Greek inscription explaining that the building of the synagogue and several adjacent structures was made possible by a gift from Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos, the "father" of the synagogue. The construction was apparently done in the second half of the third century.²⁷ The building remained a synagogue through the fourth century but ca. 400 was appropriated by the Christians of Stobi and made into a church.

The Sardis synagogue

The parade example of Diaspora synagogues is at Sardis, in western Anatolia. Excavated by archaeologists in the 1960s, it is the largest ancient synagogue yet discovered. With an assembly hall measuring 80 m by 20m, and capable of accommodating at least a thousand people, the synagogue dominated the urban center of Sardis. The building was not originally intended to serve as a synagogue: a civic basilica had evidently been built by the leaders of Sardis ca. 225 CE, as part of a large gymnasium-bath complex. The disasters that struck the Roman empire in the period 235-284, however, must have also affected Sardis (although the city escaped the Gothic sacking that nearby Ephesus experienced), and the city council sold the building to the Judaeans congregation.²⁸ That the transfer occurred after 270 is shown by numismatic evidence,²⁹ and after making preliminary alterations of the building the city's Judaeans undertook the long project of beautifying it. Laying mosaic floors in the assembly hall and in the courtyard in front of it, and facing the hall's interior walls with marble, the Judaeans of Sardis made the synagogue as elegant on the inside as it was colossal on the outside. The refinements were evidently not finished until the 350s.³⁰

More than eighty inscriptions, almost all of them in Greek, have been pieced together by John Kroll and other epigraphers and have now been published by Kroll.³¹ The majority of these are "donor inscriptions," in which an individual or a family is identified as the benefactor who made possible this or that feature in the synagogue. An example is Inscription 3, one of the earliest:

Aurelios Alexandros, also called Anatolios, citizen of Sardis, Councillor, mosaicked the third bay.³²

Aurelius Alexander was one of nine donors who identified themselves as *bouleutai*, or city councillors. They would have been among the elite of Sardis, and it is obvious that they expended a substantial sum in adorning the synagogue. Whether they had become Judaeans or were still "God-fearers" at the time of their donation is not clear. Six other donors did identify themselves as God-fearers (*theosebeis*) and can be presumed to have been Gentiles. Of the thirty donors identified in the extant inscriptions, two had Hebrew names and the rest had Greek names.³³

The synagogue uncovered at Sardis by archaeologists was obviously not the city's first. A civic decree quoted by Josephus indicates that already in the first century BC a congregation of Judaeans was given official recognition by the city of Sardis.³⁴ We must suppose that earlier and smaller structures had sufficed in Hellenistic and early Roman times, but that by the third century the Judaeian congregation at Sardis was large enough and affluent enough to acquire the huge civic basilica and convert it into a synagogue. So far as the excavators could determine, the building remained a synagogue until its destruction, evidently in 616 when the Sassanids captured and sacked Sardis. By that time paganism had disappeared from Sardis and all other Anatolian cities, and Christianity may have been the majority religion in Sardis.³⁵ That is uncertain, however, and Judaeans must still have been numerous enough to retain possession of their magnificent synagogue.

Reasons for the surge in synagogue construction

Continued numerical expansion of Judaism does not by itself explain the vogue of purpose-built synagogues, since for more than seven hundred years Judaeans had generally been content to worship in houses or other structures adapted for synagogue use. Possibly Christians too began building churches in the second half of the third century, after Gallienus wrote to the bishops that he was discontinuing the persecutions that Decius and Valerian had overseen. Very little Christian building activity, however, is documented either archaeologically or textually. For the fourth century the situation is very different. Almost immediately after his victory in 312 Constantine helped the Christians of Rome to build two huge basilical churches. After his victory over Licinius in 324 the emperor provided for the erection of two more: the enormous Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The fourth century certainly witnessed an architectural competition between Judaeian synagogues and Christian churches. A purpose-built religious structure "made a statement" to the larger community, serving as a conspicuous public reminder that the builders were an important part of the municipal culture. That this architectural competition between Judaeans and Christians had begun earlier is quite possible. At Nicomedia, where Diocletian had his palace, Christians had built a church with some pretensions, and in February of 303 - at the beginning of the Great Persecution - Diocletian ordered his troops to destroy the church. It appears, then, that at least by the 290s Christians had begun to construct churches much more impressive than those of earlier times.

Before 260, however, when Gallienus announced an end to the empire-wide persecutions, Christians would hardly have invested their wealth in building impressive churches. The only material remains of Christian "churches" built before Constantine's conversion are the house-church found at Dura Europos in the 1920s, and the mosaics found in the Megiddo prison in 2005. It therefore appears that Judaeans were several decades ahead of Christians in erecting large and attractive places of worship. An obvious reason for the surge in synagogue construction after ca. 250 would be the persecution of Christians that Decius and Valerian launched in December of 249. Hellenistic Judaeans, that is, may have seen the persecution and the new imperial policy as an opportunity for them to appeal to Gentiles who wanted to worship God but could not join a church without condemning themselves to imprisonment and death.

It is also possible that in Palestine the Judaeans' burst of synagogue construction after the middle of the third century was related to Samaritan initiatives. The Samaritans, who preferred (with considerable justification) to be called "Israelites," had for centuries maintained their ancient sacrificial tradition, sacrificing beasts to Adonai at Mt. Gerizim and following what they considered the Pentateuch of Moses. The old temple at Mt. Gerizim had been destroyed by John Hyrcanus, but was rebuilt with Hadrian's approval after the Bar Kochba war. Because it still featured sacrifice when Judaism did not, Samaritanism may have gained some adherents in Palestine during the second and third centuries, but even among Samaritans the sacrificial tradition was losing much of its old appeal.³⁶ The Samaritans also had a long tradition of meeting in synagogues, but many of these were closed by the emperors Commodus and Alexander Severus. According to the Samaritans' own tradition, around the middle of the third century the reformer Baba Rabba gave a new direction and new life to their religion, and central to his reform was the synagogue. Baba Rabba saw to the building of a great synagogue at Mt. Gerizim, and was also credited with building eight smaller synagogues in Samaria. Although some scholars have dated Baba Rabba's reforms to the early fourth century rather than the third, others believe that the Samaritans' own date - ca. 250 - is correct.³⁷

Christianity and Judaism from Constantine's conversion to the death of Constantius

Constantine's conversion to Christianity marked the beginning of Hellenistic Judaism's decline, although the repercussions of his conversion would not be fully realized until late in the fourth century. With Constantine's rise to power over the entire empire the triumph of God over the gods seemed assured, and Judaeans must have found satisfaction in that. At the same time, however, Christians could begin to define more precisely who God was. Here their argument was with the Judaeans (and the Samaritans). For the first time, Christians felt both the freedom and the need to shift their focus from God the Father to God the Son. In the 360s, Marius Victorinus explained the new emphasis:

The Greeks - those called Hellenes or pagans - profess a great number of gods, the Jews or Hebrews only one God. As for us, since truth and grace have come with the fulfilment of time, against the pagans we profess only one God, and against the Jews, a Father and a Son. Thus in speaking of these two, Father and Son, but holding fast to one God, we reject each of these religions because of that aspect by which they are mutually opposed.³⁸

The conflict between Judaeans and New Covenant Christians had been simmering ever since the "Hellenist" believers in Jesus the Christ had been expelled from Jerusalem, soon after Jesus' crucifixion. Paul's arguments that the New Covenant had replaced the Old Covenant, and Luke's portrayal of Judaeans as enemies of "the brethren," had been continued by Christian apologists, who strove to show that the Christians were right and the Judaeans were wrong in their understanding of the sacred books of Moses and the Prophets. It was to advance that argument that Justin Martyr published his *Dialogue with Tryphon the Judaeans* in the second century and that Tertullian wrote his *Against the Judaeans* in the early third. This early polemic, however, did not vilify Judaeans. It was, instead, addressed to the Judaeans, attempting to convince them of their error in persisting in the Old Covenant. Tertullian was a master of invective, but his targets were Hellenes and Romans, not Judaeans.

Even at the beginning of the fourth century the Christians' conflict with Judaeans was not yet so sharp as that against the Hellenes. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea early in the fourth century, fought on both fronts. The polemic against Hellenism was as urgent as ever for Christians, as the Great Persecution raged on. Eusebius' contribution here was his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, in fifteen books. The *Praeparatio* argued, again, that the gods of the Hellenes were despicable, that Hellenism was otherwise superficial and sterile, and that whatever was valuable in it had been borrowed from Moses and the Prophets. After completing the *Praeparatio*, and after Constantine's conversion, Eusebius turned to face the Judaeans. In his *Demonstratio Evangelica* (in twenty books, of which only the first ten survive), he assembled a long series of proof-texts to show that the Old Testament itself had prophesied the end of the Old Covenant and the saving death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The tone of Eusebius in the *Demonstratio* is earnest rather than abrasive. He seems to have still thought it possible that his arguments would convince at least some Judaeans to accept the New Covenant.³⁹

Other Christians by the early fourth century hated Judaeans, a feeling almost certainly reciprocated. The persecutions that began in 250 had not brought Christians and Judaeans closer together. The exemption given to Judaeans by the emperors must have intensified Christian hostility to the "favored" religion. As Christian expectations began to change after Constantine's conversion and triumph, so did their polemic. The battle against paganism, although not yet over, was now going very much in the Christians' favor. The probability that "the demons" would soon be vanquished, and the security that came with the emperor himself now on the side of the Christians, raised for the first time the prospect of "Christendom": a universal Christian society under Christian rulers. Such a prospect, unthinkable in the days of the Great Persecution, became even less fanciful after the Council of Nicea in 325, an ecumenical assembly of bishops that established a creed to be confessed by the entire "catholic church." As the Church itself became an empire-wide institution, with a mechanism for defining itself and for maintaining doctrinal conformity, its continued growth and ultimate triumph seemed assured.

Universalism had been latent in New Covenant Christianity from the very beginning. If God had established the New Covenant in order to bring the Gentiles to himself, then the people of the New Covenant should not rest until the Gentiles had indeed been converted. Until Constantine's reign, however, the possibility of such a universal Christianity remained very dim: much more likely, so Christians had supposed, was that when Jesus returned in Glory most of society would still be worshiping the demons, and the Christians would still be a small "elect" in an essentially pagan world. After the victories of Constantine and the Council of Nicea, the latent universalism of New Covenant Christianity became patent. Christians could no longer regard themselves as a threatened minority: God himself had made it possible for them to bring most if not all of humankind into the Church. The pagans were most obviously in need of Christian evangelizing, but after the pagans were many monotheists whose conception of God was wrong: heretic Christians, Samaritans, Gnostics, Manichees, and Judaeans.

Of all these monotheists, it was the Judaeans who most incurred the anger of Christian clerics and writers. The principal reason for the animosity was perhaps that the Judaeans posed the most attractive alternative to Christianity: because the conversion of Christians to Judaism

was still a worry for fourth-century bishops and priests, Christian leaders were keen to point out how intractably wicked the Judaeans were. Like the Samaritans, the Judaeans denied that Jesus was God or even the Son of God, and declared that the Christians' New Covenant was completely at odds with Moses and the Prophets. Unlike the Samaritans, however, the Judaeans were also - so it was believed - responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ. This belief was rooted in the Gospels, which presented Pontius Pilatus as reluctant to condemn Jesus, and as goaded on by the scribes, Pharisees, high priest and Sanhedrin. In the letters of Paul, contrarily, Jesus' crucifixion had been presented as the atoning sacrifice that established the New Covenant, a sacrifice that God himself had decreed and that had been foretold by Moses and many of the prophets. On this view, those who brought about Jesus' crucifixion were merely the instruments of God's plan for the world's salvation. The ambiguity about the role of Judaeans in Jesus' crucifixion was settled during the second and third centuries, as the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE came gradually to be understood by New Covenant Christians as a *punishment*, inflicted by God on the Judaeans for having rejected the New Covenant and more specifically for having demanded Jesus' crucifixion. By the end of the second century almost everyone had forgotten that the revolt of 66-70 had in fact been brought about because toward the end of Nero's reign many Judaeans believed that the Messiah was about to return from Heaven and deliver them from Rome, and that the most likely person to appear in the role of Messiah was Jesus.

Until the reign of Constantine the crucifixion of Jesus was not so prominent in Christian polemic as it was soon to become. In the eyes of the Hellenes and Romans a "Son of God" who was put to death by crucifixion was unbelievable, and in their efforts to convert the pagans the Christians had said relatively little about the crucifixion. This reticence ended when Jesus the Christ was worshiped by the emperor himself. That the crucified Jesus was now the Lord of Lords and King of Kings was a reversal so amazing that it was itself evidence of God's miraculous power. Instead of being glossed over or quietly admitted, Jesus' crucifixion now began to be emphasized. The discovery of the True Cross - by Helena, mother of the emperor - was part of this turnabout.⁴⁰ The earliest known artistic representation of the crucifixion of Jesus - carved in relief on the doors of the Santa Sabina church in Rome - dates from the 430s, but Christian writers of the middle and later decades of the fourth century referred frequently to the crucifixion.

The new emphasis made things more difficult for Judaeans. In Christian teaching by the fourth century, the destruction of the temple and much else of Jerusalem by Titus was a punishment inflicted on the scribes, the Pharisees, and indeed on all Judaeans.⁴¹ Likewise, the calamitous Bar Kochba revolt and the subsequent banishing of Judaeans from Jerusalem and central Judaea were yet further proof, so far as Christians could see, that God had withdrawn his protection of Judaeans generally: although they had once been God's chosen people, they had forfeited that status by their rejection and crucifixion of the Christ. In the early 420s, for example, Augustine recited the great miracles of Jesus the Christ and then repeated what by then was the standard Christian explanation for the remarkable spread of Hellenistic Judaism:

the Jews who killed him and refused to believe in him, to believe that he had to die and rise again, suffered a more wretched devastation at the hands of the Romans and were

utterly uprooted from their kingdom, where they had already been under the dominion of foreigners. They were dispersed all over the world - for indeed there is no part of the earth where they are not to be found.⁴²

Because God himself had turned against the Judaeans - so Christian polemicists claimed - it was not only permissible but even mandatory that Christians do what they could to repress Judaism.

Christian officialdom's hostility toward Judaism showed itself almost as soon as Constantine declared himself a Christian. Constantine himself, evidently as early as 315, published an edict making it illegal for a Judaeans to purchase a Christian slave.⁴³ Another edict of perhaps the same date addressed the much more important issue of proselytism and shows the vitriolic hostility of the new regime toward Judaeans and Judaism:

It is Our will that Jews and their elders and patriarchs shall be informed that if, after the issuance of this law, any of them should dare to attempt to assail with stones or with any other kind of madness—a thing which We have learned is now being done—any person who has fled their feral sect and has resorted to the worship of God, such assailant shall be immediately delivered to the flames and burned, with all his accomplices. Moreover, if any person from the people should betake himself to their nefarious sect and should join their assemblies, he shall sustain with them the deserved punishments (18 October 315).⁴⁴

Christians and all other Gentiles were thus enjoined from converting to Judaism, and evidently when such a conversion did occur both the convert and the Judaeans who assisted in the conversion were to be punished. Since the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius emperors had occasionally tried to stop or at least to slow proselytism to Judaism, but Constantine's edict was more severe and was undoubtedly more regularly enforced. Conversion in the opposite direction was protected: anyone who forcibly tried to prevent the conversion of a Judaeans to Christianity was to be burned alive. Constantius also invalidated marriages between a Christian and a Judaeans, while permitting marriages between Christians and pagans.

An impressive place of worship - whether a temple, synagogue, or church - could attract the envy and even the fury of those who belonged to an opposed religious community. In the later decades of the fourth century our sources mention many temples, synagogues and churches that were destroyed by religious rivals, and this kind of demolition may have begun with an action of Constantine at Heliopolis, in the Bek'a of Lebanon. Constantine sent troops to destroy the temple of Atargatis, or Aphrodite, which was especially noisome to Christians because of the sacred prostitutes who plied their trade at the temple. So far as we know, however, troops were not employed against synagogues, either by Constantine or by his successors. The synagogues destroyed or appropriated toward the end of the fourth century were attacked not by the emperor's soldiers but by impromptu bands of monks and vigilantes from the Christian laity, usually led by the bishop of the city in which the violence was perpetrated. By the 380s and 390s thousands of monks were available to provide emotional and physical support for religious projects, and attacks on synagogues became fairly frequent. On the other hand, we have no evidence for such attacks during the reigns of Constantine and Constantius. When Christians

burned a synagogue in 388, their action seems to have been a novelty. We may tentatively conclude that under Constantine and Constantius the empire's Christians did not yet take the repression of Judaism into their own hands, but relied instead on the restrictive edicts issued by the emperors.

Judaean hostility against Constantius was in any case intense enough that in 353 the Judaeans of Caesarea Maritima revolted against Gallus, Constantius' cousin and Caesar. The Caesarea Judaeans hoped to establish their own favorite, Patricius, as ruler of Judaea. Gallus had no difficulty putting down the revolt, in the process (or as punishment for the rebels) destroying much of Caesarea.⁴⁵ Perhaps his success emboldened Gallus either to overstep his authority or to conceive greater ambitions: soon after the revolt ended Gallus was summoned to appear before Constantius and was executed on a charge of treason.

Judaean attacks on churches during Julian's reign

When Julian took over the empire from Constantius in 361 and declared his apostasy from Christianity, pagans and Judaeans in a number of cities in the Greek east celebrated the return of "normalcy" after almost forty years of rule by Christian emperors. At his accession Julian was still a young man. Expectations were that he would rule for decades, and that in his old age he would see to it that his successor on the throne would be another worshiper of the gods and an opponent of Christianity: the Christian dispensation under Constantine and his sons - so it seemed - would eventually be nothing more than a brief aberration in the empire's long history. In 361, therefore, resentment against the Christians that had been pent up for decades erupted into violence. We have seen that as soon as Constantius' death was announced in Alexandria, a largely pagan mob lynched Bishop George, who had encouraged the vandalizing of the city's temples.

Judaean in the Levant were also quick to take advantage of Julian's anti-Christian administration. A great proponent of sacrifices, Julian proposed to rebuild for the Judaeans the temple in Jerusalem. At the time of his death work had begun, but was thereupon abandoned (the church historian Socrates reports that the project was given up after a trio of miracles frightened the builders).⁴⁶ During the two years that Julian was in control Judaeans in the cities of Palestine and Syria attacked and burned churches, some of them basilicas. We may guess that in so doing they had always the moral and sometimes the physical support of pagans, but our scanty sources on the episode do not say so. According to Ambrose of Milan, during Julian's reign the Judaeans burned Christian basilicas in Gaza, Ascalon, Berytus, "and almost all such places."⁴⁷ In the cities named Judaeans are likely to have been at least as numerous as Christians, and Judaean violence in the years 361-363 may not have extended beyond the Levant.

The "return to normalcy" that came with Julian's accession ended as abruptly as it began. In 363, after only two years in power, Julian was slain in Mesopotamia and was succeeded by Jovian, a Christian. No more Christian churches were burned. Although Christians retaliated against the synagogues, they did not do so immediately. Neither under Jovian nor under his successors, Valentinian (364-375) in the west and Valens (364-378) in the east, do we hear of Christian vigilantes attacking synagogues. These Christian emperors seem to have insisted on

public order and on the religious neutrality of the imperial administration. By this time perhaps half the empire's population was Christian, perhaps a tenth was Judaeans, the rest either continuing in pagan polytheism (or Neoplatonism) or adhering to one of the new dualist creeds such as Manichaeism and Mazdaism.

The zenith of the synagogues in Late Antiquity

The evenhandedness of several emperors seems to have encouraged the improvement and enlargement of old synagogues and the building of new ones. The middle and later decades of the fourth century marked the high point of ancient synagogue construction, as Judaeans in at least some cities strove to match or surpass the Christians. In Syrian Apamea a synagogue of modest size but fine quality was set up in a prominent location: on the city's main street, the *cardo maximus*, about a hundred meters south of the street's intersection with the *decumanus*. The main hall (15.50 x 9 m) of the Apamea synagogue had a mosaic floor with geometric decorations, and Greek inscriptions identify the donors and stipulate how many feet of mosaic each donor paid for. Most of the donors named are Greek, and the few Hebrew names (*Isakios* and *Saulos*) are transliterated into Greek. The inscriptions also date the mosaic work to 391 (the 703rd year of the Seleukid Era).⁴⁸ Other synagogues erected in the late fourth century have been excavated at Gerasa in Jordan and at Elche in Spain, the latter being the westernmost ancient synagogue yet discovered.⁴⁹

Hellenistic Judaism still had a strong appeal, not only for pagans but even - and perhaps especially - for some Christians. The writings of Ephraem the Syrian and of John Chrysostom, in the middle and later decades of the fourth century, include a great deal of virulent polemic against the Judaeans, and the polemic leaves no doubt that in Syria, at least, many Christians were attracted to the synagogues, especially at the time of the great festivals.⁵⁰ In early autumn came the New Year festival (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), both heralded by the blowing of the *shofar*, and then the eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth). In spring the great festivals were Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Weeks (Pentecost). After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple the "pilgrim feasts" were celebrated at the local synagogues and became the high-point of the year for the entire Judaeans community. Although the festivals were essentially religious, and would become more somber under rabbinic influence, in the Hellenistic Diaspora they were also occasions for celebration and festivity. It is not surprising that many urban Christians looked forward first to the Judaeans fasts and then to the feasts that followed, with wine, music and dancing. In the fourth century it was apparently not uncommon, at least in the larger cities, for Christians to maintain some sort of quasi-Judaean identity.⁵¹ Many Christian men were circumcised. On the Sabbath day men and women refrained from work and made their way to the synagogue, and on the next day they attended church and received the eucharistic sacrament.

Christian polemic against Judaeans, and the attack on synagogues

With the synagogues in competition with the churches, Christian bishops considered it their duty to vilify Judaeans and Judaism. The bishops seldom focused on what Judaeans were doing or not doing in the late fourth century, but instead recalled what they had done in the

distant past. The New Testament provided much material, but so did the Old Testament, with its many stories of how the people of Judah, or of Israel, had sinned and incurred the wrath of God. Thus were the Judaeans of Late Antiquity condemned on the testimony of their own scriptures.

Perhaps the most scurrilous portraits of the Judaeans are to be found in the eight *Sermons against the Judaeans* written by John Chrysostom. A native of Antioch and a student of Libanius, who was the leading philosopher of his day, John first attracted attention as an orator and a pleader in court (the adjective *chrysostomos* means “golden tongued”). He then left the legal profession to become a Christian cleric, eventually becoming bishop of Constantinople. While still in Antioch, John Chrysostom was distressed at the number of Christians who attended synagogues and participated in the Judaeans’ great autumnal fasts and festivals. In order to deter these Judaizing Christians from endangering their salvation and misleading other Christians, he delivered eight consecutive sermons designed to show how wicked the Judaeans were. His illustrations came not from his experience with Judaeans in fourth-century Antioch but from proof-texts that he found in the Bible. Psalm 106, for example, provided grist for Chrysostom’s mill. The psalmist here asks Adonai for forgiveness: “Like our forefathers we have sinned, we have gone astray and done wrong” (OSB 106:6). The psalmist then goes on to catalog his forefathers’ sins: they complained during the Exodus from Egypt, they set up the Golden Calf, and finally, on reaching Canaan, “their sons and their daughters they sacrificed to foreign deities; they shed innocent blood, the blood of sons and daughters offered to the gods of Canaan.” The words of the psalmist became, in Chrysostom’s sermon, evidence of the chronic wickedness of Judaeans:

Do you see that demons dwell in their souls and that these demons are more dangerous than the ones of old? And this is very reasonable. In the old days the Jews acted impiously toward the prophets; now they outrage the Master of the prophets. Tell me this. Do you not shudder to come into the same place with men possessed, who have so many unclean spirits, who have been reared amid slaughter and bloodshed? Must you share a greeting with them and exchange a bare word? Must you not turn away from them since they are the common disgrace and infection of the whole world? Have they not come to every form of wickedness? Have not all the prophets spent themselves making many and long speeches of accusation against them? What tragedy, what manner of lawlessness have they not eclipsed by their blood-guiltiness? They sacrificed their own sons and daughters to demons. They refused to recognize nature, they forgot the pangs of birth, they trod underfoot the rearing of their children, they overturned from their foundations the laws of kinship, they became more savage than any wild beast.⁵²

Although such invective may have deterred an ordinary Christian from attending the feasts of the Judaeans, it is not likely to have persuaded him or her to attack the local synagogue. More professional Christians, however, could be and were incited to violence. This violence seems to have begun in 388, when Theodosius was *de facto* the ruler of the entire empire. By the 380s cenobite monks were numerous in the eastern provinces, and were ready to play an important part in the assault against synagogues as well as against pagan temples and various

other religious establishments. In 388, in the small city of Callinicum (*Kallinikon*) on the middle Euphrates, the city's bishop incited a mob of monks and other Christians to burn down a synagogue and a small place of worship that belonged to the Valentinians (Gnostic Christians). When Theodosius learned of this riot from a letter sent by his *comes orientis* (Count of the Orient), the emperor ordered the *comes* to punish the monks and to see to it that the bishop of Callinicum himself provide the funds to rebuild the synagogue for the city's Judaeans.

It was at this point that Bishop Ambrose of Milan, the capital of the empire in the west, wrote a lengthy letter to Theodosius, protesting the order. To force a bishop to construct a synagogue, Ambrose argued, was analogous to forcing Christians to build altars to the pagan gods and goddesses.

There is, then, no adequate cause for such a commotion, that the people should be so severely punished for the burning of a building, and much less since it is the burning of a synagogue, a home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly, which God Himself has condemned. For thus we read, where the Lord our God speaks by the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah: 'And I will do to this house, which is called by My Name, wherein ye trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh, and I will cast you forth from My sight, as I cast forth your brethren, the whole seed of Ephraim.'⁵³

Although relying primarily on his Biblical proof-text, Ambrose added that even in terms of human justice the Christians were within their rights, since during the reign of Julian - twenty-five years earlier - Judaeans in several cities (although not in Callinicum) had burned down Christian churches.⁵⁴ In addition to the letter, Ambrose preached a sermon along the same lines in the Milan cathedral, with the emperor in attendance. After the worship service was over, Theodosius spoke with Ambrose and indicated that he would amend his order to the Count of the Orient.⁵⁵

Although the bishop and the monks who burned the Callinicum synagogue may have gotten off lightly, further attacks moved Theodosius to issue an edict designed to protect synagogues from Christian violence. In a rescript dating to September of 393 Theodosius ordered the *comes orientis* to punish those Christians who attacked synagogues or tried to prevent Judaeans from assembling:

It is sufficiently established that the sect of the Judaeans is prohibited by no law. We are therefore gravely disturbed by the interdiction imposed in some places on their assemblies. Your Sublime Magnitude shall, upon reception of this order, repress with due severity the excess of those who presume to commit illegal deeds under the name of the Christian religion and who attempt to destroy and despoil synagogues.⁵⁶

This imperial policy - that Judaism was a *religio licita* and that destroying or damaging a synagogue was therefore a crime - was restated by Theodosius' son Arcadius (395-408) and grandson Theodosius II (408-450).

The laws of the empire notwithstanding, violence continued until most synagogues of any

size or architectural pretensions were either destroyed or in Christian hands. The Apamea synagogue, nearing completion in 391, was within a few decades taken over and made into a Christian church. The synagogue built at Stobi by Polycharmos was taken over by Christians, as mentioned above, at the end of the fourth century. The excavations at Elche, on the coast of Spain, suggest that the synagogue there was converted to a church in the seventh century.⁵⁷ Christian texts tell us how at Alexandria, ca. 415, Bishop Cyril led mobs against all of the city's synagogues, taking them over for Christian use and expelling the Judaeans from the city in which Judaism had been so important an element for seven hundred years.⁵⁸ Other famous casualties in the first half of the fifth century were synagogues at Edessa and Constantinople. At Edessa Bishop Rabbula rededicated the synagogue as the Church of St. Stephen. The synagogue at Constantinople, perhaps built when the city was still Byzantium, became the Church of Mary Theotokos (Mother of God). In another celebrated rededication, the "Great Synagogue" at Antioch became the Christian Church of the Maccabean Martyrs.

Even in Palestine, where Judaeans may still have outnumbered Christians, a monk named Barsauma led a company of fellow monks on a rampage between 419 and 422, destroying several synagogues.⁵⁹ Archaeologists have found that at Gerasa the Judaeans may have retained possession of their synagogue for a longer time, but by 531 it was a Christian church.⁶⁰ The magnificent synagogue at Capernaum was destroyed early in the seventh century, perhaps after Heraclius took the Levant back from the Sassanids.

On the fate of these important synagogues we have less detail than we have for an utterly obscure synagogue in the town of Mago, on the island of Minorca. The story of the Mago synagogue is known only because a letter detailing it, written by Bishop Severus of Minorca, was preserved in manuscript tradition.⁶¹ In the year 418 the island's Christians were energized, according to Severus, by the arrival on the island of the bones of St. Stephen and by the miracles that attended the deposition of these relics in a church in the town of Iammo. Led by Bishop Severus, the Christians of Iammo made a procession across the island to the town of Mago, to convert to Christianity that town's Judaeans. Advancing on the synagogue the pilgrims were pelted with stones thrown by Judaeans, but the Christians maintained their course, took possession of the synagogue, and burned it. Thereupon, the Judaeans who belonged to the synagogue - 540 in number - were all at once converted to Christianity, and agreed to pay for the erection of a church on the site where their synagogue had lately stood.

In 423 Theodosius II made another attempt to stop the violence, restating the edicts that his predecessors and he had published in 393, 397 and 412. As part of his broader policy, however, Theodosius dulled the edge of the ban on synagogue-burning by stipulating that henceforth no new synagogues were to be built: "In the future no synagogues shall be constructed, and the old ones shall remain in their present condition."⁶² The 423 edict was no more effective than its predecessors in preventing monks and other Christian zealots from attacking synagogues, and the assaults continued through the fifth and sixth centuries.

Theodosius II was also the emperor who terminated the Judaeans patriarchate. Patriarch Gamaliel VII, the last of the line that had begun with Hillel four hundred years earlier, died at Tiberias in 425 and Theodosius took the opportunity to abolish the office that Gamaliel had held.

A law of 429 refers to the cessation (*excessus*) of the patriarchate.⁶³ Whatever central authority Judaism had in the preceding centuries was now gone.

The introduction of Hebrew into the synagogues of the Hellenistic Diaspora

In the last generation or two of the patriarchate, synagogue worship in at least a few parts of the Diaspora had undergone a change, the importance of which was small in the short run but enormous in the long run. This was the introduction of the Hebrew language for liturgical purposes. Evidence is sparse and discussion of this topic has been quite limited, but in their commentary on the Aphrodisias inscriptions Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum have brought together enough bits of evidence to sketch a tentative picture. Until late in the fourth century, evidently, in most of the Hellenistic Diaspora synagogue worship had been conducted entirely in Greek.⁶⁴ The Tanakh was read in any one of four Greek versions. As for prayers, the Mishnah shows that ca. 200 the *Shema* and the *Shemoneh esreh* were often recited in Greek and other languages.⁶⁵

During the second century, and perhaps because both the *Christiani* and New Covenant Christians had interpreted the Septuagint in their own ways, another Greek translation of the Tanakh was produced, this one by Aquila of Pontus. Aquila was a convert to Judaism from Christianity, and he learned Hebrew in order to make a translation that could not be so easily exploited by Christians searching the Law and the Prophets for foreshadowings of Jesus the Christ. Aquila's translation was more literal or more faithful to the Hebrew original than was the Septuagint, although sometimes at the price of intelligibility.⁶⁶ That by Late Antiquity Aquila's translation was more popular than the Septuagint among Hellenistic Judaeans is almost certain, but proof is lacking because we have no fourth-century Philo or Josephus to guide us. Other Greek versions of the Tanakh were produced by Symmachos and Theodotion, both of whom - like Aquila - had proselytized from Christianity to Judaism.

In Mesopotamia and the Levant an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible was used in the synagogues. The earliest evidence for such a translation - a *targum* - comes from the caves at Qumran. There were found fragments of targums for various Biblical books, and one complete targum for the Book of Job. By the third century these early targums gave way to a comprehensive targum approved by the rabbinic academies. This was the Onqelos targum, which according to rabbinic tradition was the work of a proselyte named Onqelos who worked under the supervision of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua (that tradition would date the Onqelos targum to the early second century, several generations too early).⁶⁷ The name Onqelos is perhaps a distortion of Aquila, although it is quite unlikely that the proselyte Aquila of Pontus was in any way responsible for the Onqelos targum. In any case, the Onqelos targum had the endorsement of the rabbis and provided a clear alternative to the Syriac *Peshitta*, which was a Christian translation of the Old Testament into the Syriac dialect of Aramaic. The *Peshitta* was evidently produced first, and the Onqelos targum was a response to it.

Although synagogue worship in the Diaspora may traditionally have been conducted almost entirely in the vernacular, whether Aramaic or Greek, that evidently began to change in the late fourth century, as Hebrew began to be used for prayers and for readings from the Tanakh.

Reynolds and Tannenbaum go so far as to suggest that after ca. 400 some knowledge of Hebrew may have been compulsory in what until then had been the Hellenistic Diaspora, and they note that in Late Antiquity Judaeans began identifying themselves more often as “Hebrews” than as “Judaeans.”⁶⁸ Perhaps the term “compulsory Hebrew education” is not supportable (it is difficult to imagine what sort of compulsion would have been available to the synagogues at that time), but Reynolds and Tannenbaum are apparently right that in Late Antiquity the use of Hebrew began to be encouraged in Diaspora synagogues.

The earliest Egyptian papyri in Hebrew or with Hebrew words and phrases date from ca. 400, suggesting that by that date the use of liturgical Hebrew in synagogues in Egypt was under way.⁶⁹ Prayers in Hebrew may have come first, but were probably - although evidence is once again lacking - soon followed by readings of the Tanakh in Hebrew. If so, the reading of the Hebrew text in the synagogue would have been accompanied by a translation into the vernacular.⁷⁰ In Italy and the western provinces the innovation of liturgical Hebrew evidently occurred somewhat later, but seems to have taken place by the sixth century.⁷¹

The spread of rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity

The use of Hebrew in the synagogues of the Hellenistic Diaspora is significant for more than linguistic reasons. The deference to Hebrew as a sacred language implied also a dependence on the rabbis, who knew both the sacred language and the oral Torah. Thus the evolution of the Hellenistic Diaspora toward rabbinic Judaism seems to have gone hand-in-hand with the growing importance of Hebrew in worship. The same sites at which Hebrew is attested also provide evidence for the presence of rabbis.⁷² For the liturgical innovations some elementary instruction in Hebrew (if nothing else, memorization of a few Hebrew prayers and phrases) was necessary. We may imagine, then, that here and there in Late Antiquity something like an early yeshiva may have operated in conjunction with a synagogue, a rabbi having arrived from Galilee or Mesopotamia to instruct the men of the synagogue in the Hebrew prayers and also in the Mishnah.

The rabbis in the academies at Sepphoris and Tiberias (and also at Nehardea, Pumbeditha and Sura, in Mesopotamia) had no use for translations of the Hebrew, whether into Greek, Aramaic, or any other language, and they insisted that the Tanakh be read in Hebrew. The rabbis were also adamant that the two principal prayers - the *Shema*, and the *Shemoneh esreh* - be recited in Hebrew (the *Qaddish* was traditionally recited in Aramaic). An anecdote in the Yerushalmi Talmud illustrates the rabbis' insistence on the use of Hebrew. Two rabbis, the Talmud reports, visited a synagogue at Caesarea Maritima. When the congregants began to recite the *Shema* in Greek one of the rabbis, Levi bar Hiya, was appalled and would have stopped the service right then and there. Rabbi Yosi, more tolerant, restrained him: “better to recite the *Shema* in Greek than not to recite it at all.”⁷³ In another anecdote an Aramaic targum of the Book of Job was brought to the Temple Mount, and in disgust Rabbi Gamaliel II ordered that the targum be buried, and so it was, with a tub of mortar poured atop it to ensure that the offending translation would never again see the light of day.⁷⁴ Thus at the time that Christians were exerting themselves to translate their Bible into Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian and Gothic, the rabbis were warning the synagogues of dire consequences if God's

words were read, or God was addressed, in any language other than Hebrew.

The introduction of Hebrew into the synagogues of the Diaspora, and the presence of rabbis who could teach the oral Torah, can be seen as part of what Seth Schwartz has called “the rejudaization” of Diaspora Judaism. And, with Schwartz, we must see this “rejudaization” as the synagogues’ response to the emerging Christendom.⁷⁵ At the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, as detailed above, Christian coercion of Judaeans became widespread in the areas under the Roman emperors’ control (in Sassanid Mesopotamia persecution was punished and therefore uncommon). The most conspicuous aspects of this repression were the burnings or appropriations of synagogues, but less visible aspects were presumably more pervasive. That is, the pressure on individual Judaeans to leave the synagogue and convert to Christianity must have been intense, as Christian clergy and laity alike warned that Judaeans were headed for an eternity in Hell, and as social and governmental restrictions on Judaeans tightened. John Chrysostom’s sermons leave no doubt that in his day there were Christians who were moving toward the synagogues, but traffic in the other direction must have been heavier. Unfortunately, we have no Judaeans texts from this period that describe the problems being faced by the synagogues, but the coincidence of the Christian repression of Judaism and the “rejudaization” of the synagogues strongly suggests that the turn toward Hebrew and toward the rabbis was meant to stem the defection of synagogue members.

The use of Hebrew and the adoption of the oral Torah - the Mishnah - would hardly have been effective means of recruiting converts to Judaism. The innovations would instead have been a deterrent for Gentiles. As a means of retaining wavering Judaeans, however, the accentuation of differences with the Christian churches would have made sense. While the churches could provide a Greek translation of God’s word to Moses and the Prophets, the synagogues could offer the original Hebrew in which God had spoken. And although the Christians were familiar with those parts of God’s covenant that had been written down by Moses when he descended from Mt. Sinai, only the rabbis knew the rest of it.

A law from the middle of the sixth century provides some evidence that in synagogues of the Hellenistic Diaspora both the use of Hebrew and the teaching of the Mishnah were (or were seen as) “defenses” against the defection of Judaeans to the churches. In 529 Justinian, perhaps the most zealous champion of Christianity ever to rule the empire, issued an edict (ineffectual, of course) banning the use of Hebrew in synagogue worship: Judaeans were to hear the “Old Testament” read in the vernacular. At the same time, Justinian ordered the synagogues to abandon their teaching of the *deuterosis*, a term that in Patristic writing regularly referred to the Mishnah or more broadly to the laws of the Pharisees.⁷⁶

The Galilean academies, the Tosefta, and the “Jerusalem” Talmud

The writing down of the Mishnah, accomplished at Sepphoris during the patriarchate of Judah ha-Nasi, stimulated a great deal of discussion in the rabbinic academies of both Galilee and Mesopotamia, as the leading rabbis pored over the minutiae of their oral *torah*. One of the first-fruits of this activity was the writing down of a second compendium of the oral law, the Tosefta (“supplement,” or “extension”). Completed in Galilee by the middle of the third

century, the Tosefta is said to have been the work of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, who had come to Galilee from Mesopotamia and was a contemporary of Judah ha-Nasi. The Tosefta's arrangement into *sedarim* and tractates is the same as that of the Mishnah, and on many of the oral laws it provides more Tannaitic discussion than does the Mishnah. Perhaps Hiyya bar Abba hoped that the Tosefta would be used in place of the shorter Mishnah, but it failed to displace its predecessor. The compilers of both Talmuds knew it well, however, and the Yerushalmi Talmud often comments on Tosefta material.

Throughout the third and fourth centuries the patriarch and his circle of learned rabbis continued to operate their school in Galilee, first at Sepphoris and then at Tiberias. Young men came to the rabbinic academy to study the *torah* with these distinguished scholars, and those students who were adept at memorizing vast amounts of material and at grasping fine distinctions were ultimately graduated. In an ordination ceremony the successful student was himself given the title of rabbi, and was from that point qualified to make pronouncements on law and ritual.

In addition to instructing young men, the leaders of the Galilean academy continued to discuss and debate the Mishnah, elaborating on every sentence and sometimes every word of the sacred law. The substance of these debates and pronouncements was passed down (although with some distortion) both orally and in form of written notes through later generations of rabbis. Toward the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century this commentary upon the Mishnah was itself given a definitive written form.⁷⁷ The combination of the Mishnah and the discussion about the Mishnah was called a *talmud*, or "study." Although produced in Galilee rather than in Jerusalem, the *talmud* written down ca. 400 CE is called the "Jerusalem" or *yerushalmi* Talmud. The organization of the Jerusalem Talmud follows that of the Mishnah: it consists of sixty-three tractates distributed among six *sedarim*. The text of the Mishnah, in Hebrew, is given first, and to this brief text (usually not more than a few sentences) is appended a long discussion (usually several pages) or commentary, mostly in Aramaic although with some Hebrew sentences interspersed. The third- and fourth-century disputants whose opinions and judgements appear here are referred to as the *'amora'im* (the *'amor'a* was, in Aramaic, a "talker" or "teacher"). Eventually, the commentary was given the name *gemara*, or "completion." The Talmud was thus a combination of Rabbi Judah's Mishnah and the Gemara that followed it.

The Babylonian Talmud

In Mesopotamia too the Mishnah of Rabbi Judah was the object of study. The authorities here were in most respects on a par with those in Galilee, but their title differed slightly. The title *rabbi* ("my great one" or "my teacher") was conferred only in Galilee, and the graduate of the Mesopotamian academies was content with the slightly less honorific title of *rab*, which lacked the pronominal suffix "my" and therefore meant simply "great one" or "teacher." The Mesopotamian Rab, or Rav, nevertheless played the same role as did the Galilean Rabbi, acting as a judge on legal matters and as an authority on ritual and liturgy.

The first Tannaitic academy in Mesopotamia, in existence before 70 CE, was far to the north, at Nisibis. Two other academies, much more famous and influential than the one at Nisibis, were established by students of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. The first of these, supposed to

have been founded in 212 by Rabbi Samuel, was located at Nehardea, on the Euphrates forty miles upstream from Babylon. When Nehardea was sacked by a Palmyrene army, in 258, the school was moved to Pumbeditha, the ancient name of the city that is now Fallujah. Even more successful than the Nehardea-Pumbeditha academy was a rival school at Sura, two hundred miles upstream from Pumbeditha. The Sura academy was founded and led by Rabbi Abba Arika. Both Samuel and Abba Arika focused their instruction on the Mishnah redacted by their teacher, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi.⁷⁸

The Mesopotamian or “Babylonian” (*babli*) Talmud was written down ca. 500. In the Babli, which for the last thousand years has been *the* Talmud in Judaism, appear the discussion and opinions of twelve famous *'amora'im*, whose lives spanned seven generations beginning with Samuel and Abba Arika. The Babli differs from the Yerushalmi Talmud especially in its more restricted scope: as a product of the Diaspora, it offers little commentary on those *sedarim* that have to do either with the temple or with the holy soil of the Land of Israel. For the seder Tohoroth the only tractates for which the Babli offers commentary are the like-named *tohoroth* (“cleannesses”) tractate and the *niddah* (“menstruating woman”). Of the 63 tractates of the Mishnah, the Babli supplies commentary (*gemara*) on only 36. As in the Jerusalem Talmud, in the Babylonian Talmud the Mishnah is written in Hebrew but the commentary is mostly in Aramaic, this time the Eastern Aramaic of Mesopotamia rather than the Western Aramaic of the Levant.

Judaism obviously prospered in Sassanid Mesopotamia. How many Mesopotamians belonged to the synagogues is uncertain, but guesses range as high as two million. Even on a low estimate Judaeans accounted for at least ten per cent of the population of Mesopotamia, and on a high estimate one in every four Mesopotamians was a Judaeans at the time the Babli Talmud was completed.⁷⁹

Judaeans in the reigns of Justin (518-527) and Justinian (525-565)

Despite the violence done to synagogues by Christian mobs in the later fourth and the fifth century, and despite Theodosius II's edict banning the construction of new synagogues, in the Levant a considerable number of synagogues were built toward the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century. These are again best documented in ancient Palestine, their remains having recently been excavated by Israeli archaeologists.⁸⁰ Material evidence has been found for approximately a hundred synagogues that were functioning in Late Antiquity, twenty-five of them in the Golan Heights. The most impressive is again the synagogue at Capernaum. As summarized by Levine, “this building, monumental in size and ornate in decoration, was completed in the plan as we know it today only in the latter part of the fifth century, i.e. well into the Byzantine era.”⁸¹

The legal position of Judaism in Late Antiquity remained what it had been under the pagan and the earlier Christian emperors: Judaism was a *religio licita*. Even the abolition of the patriarchate by Theodosius II in the 420s did not affect the privileges that synagogue officials had enjoyed for centuries. Theodosius II and his successors continued to respect local Judaeans authorities, whether Talmudic or non-Talmudic, as qualified to adjudicate cases between a

Judaean plaintiff and a Judaean defendant (unless the one or the other appealed to the state).⁸²

The imperial recognition of Judaeans as part of municipal life in the empire - a recognition that began with the Romans' conquest of the Levant and Egypt in the first century BC - was seriously diminished in the reigns of Justin and Justinian. Justin (518-527) came from Illyrian peasant stock, had risen through the ranks of the army to high military commands, and at age 65 became emperor. Illiterate, he was supposed to have signed his name with a stencil. Because he had no sons, the elderly Justin made his nephew Justinian co-emperor in 525, and when Justin died in 527 Justinian became sole emperor. The reigns of Justin and Justinian can be seen as in many ways the culminating chapter in the creation of Christendom. By the time that Justinian died in 565, the Byzantine empire had a thoroughly Christian character, even though many people in the empire were still Judaean and a few were still pagan. Like his uncle, Justinian believed that it was his duty as emperor to bring all of his subjects to see "the truth." The truth was, in his view, the doctrines proclaimed by the catholic Church, which by the sixth century was increasingly called - in Greek writings - the *orthodox* Church.⁸³

Justin's and Justinian's efforts were directed against four groups of recalcitrants. First were the heretical Christian churches: Monophysites, Montanists, Arians, Donatists, Nestorians, and several smaller communions. Justinian's method of coercion was to deprive the heretics of their civil rights.

Laying down the principle that 'from those who are not orthodox in their worship of God, earthly goods should also be withheld,' he applied it ruthlessly. Right belief was made a condition for admission to the service of the State, and an attestation of orthodoxy from three witnesses was required. Heretics were debarred from practising the liberal professions of law and teaching. But Justinian went much further in the path of persecution. He deprived heretics of the common rights of citizenship. They were not allowed to inherit property; their testamentary rights were strictly limited; they could not appear in court to bear witness against orthodox persons.⁸⁴

But these measures were enforced unevenly. Justinian was most successful in eliminating the small communions, and the Montanists virtually disappeared. After Justinian's general Belisarius completed his conquest of North Africa from the Arian Vandals (in 534), the emperor ordered that all Arian churches be turned over to orthodox clergy. Justinian also rid his realm of most of its Donatists and Nestorians, many of the latter sect emigrating and settling in Mesopotamia, where the Sassanid regime gave them no trouble and may even have welcomed them. The Monophysites, on the other hand, were simply too numerous for Justinian to confront. Because Monophysites accounted for much if not most of the population in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, the coercion of these "heretics" was sporadic.

Pagans were fewer and mostly unorganized, and so an easier target. The pagans of the remote countryside were rigorously evangelized, their shrines to the old gods were torn down, and little churches were built in the villages. More controversial was the move against the elite pagans of the cities. In the sixth century there still were pagans in both the army and the government, and these were either persuaded to convert to orthodox Christianity or expelled

from their posts. Justinian also brought pressure to bear on the teachers of philosophy, especially in the great and venerable academies in Athens and Alexandria. A few philosophers ostensibly converted to the orthodox church, but most remained pagans and lost their positions and their schools. The properties were confiscated, and so in 529 - after more than eight hundred years - the philosophical schools of Athens were closed.

Manichees and Samaritans were treated most severely. Not only was the Manichaean religion banned, but the penalty for those who persisted in it was death. The Samaritans, or Israelites as they called themselves, were still numerous in Palestine, but in the Diaspora were a negligible minority. Justinian was therefore able to coerce many of the Diaspora Samaritans into conversion, and deprived the rest of their citizenship. In Palestine itself, however, he met armed resistance. In this war the Samaritans massacred an unspecified number of Christians, and Justinian's troops slew many if not most of the Palestinian Samaritans (the number of Samaritans killed varies between 20,000 and 100,000 in the ancient sources). The surviving Samaritans, who are today a disenfranchised underclass, clustered in the vicinity of ancient Neapolis, modern Nablus.

Judaeans, like Monophysite Christians, were too numerous to be dealt with in so draconian a manner. Perhaps Justin had tried to eliminate Judaism, but Justinian did not. Although he regarded Judaeans as "abominable men who sit in darkness" Justinian exempted them from his measures against Samaritans, Manichees, pagans, and heretic Christians. Like the rest, Judaeans were forbidden entry into military or government service, but they were not stripped of their personal civil rights. Formally, Justinian thus continued the traditional policies of his predecessors, recognizing Judaism as a legal religion.⁸⁵ An exception to this relative leniency was his treatment of Judaeans in the former Vandal kingdom of North Africa: after his general Belisarius defeated the Vandals, Justinian annexed North Africa and treated the Judaeans there as harshly as the heretic Christians and the pagans, giving them all the choice of conversion to orthodox Christianity or loss of their citizen rights. The synagogues were to be made into churches.

Although it was only in North Africa that Justinian tried (but failed) to eradicate Judaism, throughout his realm Judaeans were gravely affected by the emperor's zeal to make the empire a thoroughly orthodox Christian society. The suppression of pagans, Manichees, Samaritans, and most of the heretic Christian communions isolated the Judaeans in an increasingly orthodox Christendom. Most ominous was the removal of elite pagans from positions in government and the schools. "Once this wedge was withdrawn," Peter Brown observed, "the non-Christian found himself an outlaw in a unified state. The Jews felt this change immediately."⁸⁶ Seventy years after the death of Justinian the alienation of the Judaeans (and of Monophysite Christians, secret pagans, and others) from the Byzantine empire would be an important factor in the Muslims' rapid conquest of the Levant.

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1. *Codex Theodosianus* 16.8 contains 29 edicts or *constitutiones*, all on Judaeans; 16.9 has another five on Judaeans with Christian slaves.
 2. Millar 1992, p. 110, observes that if the Judaism of the Diaspora can speak for itself at all, it is only through the physical remains of its synagogues, its inscriptions, and occasional papyri. Few as they are, these pertain mostly to the Greek-speaking eastern empire. “The social, intellectual and religious history of the Jews in the Latin-speaking environment of the western half of the Later Roman Empire remains a largely unexplored field” (Millar 1992, p. 99).
 3. For a comprehensive presentation of Judaism in North Africa see Hirschberg 1974. The 2006 volume of the *CHJ* lacks a chapter on the African Diaspora in the period 235-650 CE.
 4. See Chouraqui 1968, p. 19, citing Ibn Khaldun.
 5. At the time, Aghmat was a large city with a diverse population, much of which was Judaeans. After their victory at Aghmat the Almoravids built Marrakech, twenty miles to the north, intending it to be a more purely Muslim city. Aghmat soon shrank in size and importance.
 6. Arabia *eudaimon* in Greek, and Arabia *felix* in Latin.
 7. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 10.
 8. Hoyland 2001, pp. 146-47.
 9. On these myths see Parfitt 1996, pp. 3-5.
 10. All of this is well summarized at Parfitt 1996, pp. 9-10. Parfitt there concludes that recent DNA research and other physical analyses “seem to provide overwhelming evidence in favour of the Arabian origin of the Yemenite Jews. Nevertheless, on little or no evidence, some contemporary scholars continue to insist that the Yemenite Jews are descended uniquely from some ancient Israelite implantation into South Arabia.” For bringing the physical evidence to historians’ attention, Parfitt especially credits Michael Weingarten, an Israeli physician who was for many years involved with the health care for a Yemenite Jewish community in Israel, and who subsequently was chairman of the Dept. of Family Medicine at Tel Aviv University. At the Second International Congress on Yemenite Jewish Studies (held at Princeton University in 1992) Weingarten delivered a paper, “The Genetic Identity of the Yemenite Jews,” which not surprisingly led to heated controversy. Weingarten addressed the same question on pp. 20-23 of his book, *Changing Health and Changing Culture: The Yemenite Jews in Israel* (London: Praeger, 1992).

Prominent among the scholars who describe the Yemenite Judaeans as “pure Jews” is Ahroni 1986. Ahroni’s discussion of this touchy subject begins with a summary: “Based on evidence from ancient texts and artifacts, the conclusion is drawn that Yemen’s Jewish settlements were populated not by Judaized Himyarites but by Jews from the tribes of Israel who had migrated to Yemen” (Ahroni 1986, p. 42). The discussion ends even more emphatically: “Thus it seems safe to conclude that Yemenite Jewry is essentially of a pure Jewish extraction, an

integral part of the dispersed tribes of Israel who had found refuge in Yemen during different periods” (Ahroni 1986, p. 48).

11. Schwartz 2001, pp. 126-61, reviews the Galilean evidence for coins, theaters, bathtubs, triclinia, mosaics, and other works of art. On pp. 175-76 Schwartz concludes that even in Palestine most Judaeans were only “occasional” followers of rabbinic precepts. “This loose periphery of supporters is likely to have consisted of people who in most respects lived normatively Greco-Roman lives and whose Jewishness was strictly compartmentalized (e.g., perhaps they refrained from eating pork and circumcised their sons but participated without hesitation in public festivals).” In the Diaspora the Hellenizing tendencies must have been even more common.

12. JT, Tractate *‘Abodah Zarah*, v,4 (Schwab tr.). See Smallwood 1981, p. 540.

13. Levine 2000, p. 162: “Most excavations carried out over the past generation, the Golan region excepted, indicate that the first stages of a synagogue edifice can be dated no earlier than the mid-third or fourth century. Such is the case in the Galilee, for example, at Horvat ‘Ammudim, Gush Halav, Khirbet Shema‘, Meiron, Nevoraya, Hammat Tiberias, Hammat Gader, Ma‘oz Hayyim, Rehov, Bet Shean (north), and perhaps Chorazim.” At p. 164 Levine provides a map showing the locations of all the excavated synagogues in Roman-Byzantine Palestine.

14. Levine 2000, p. 284: In third- and fourth-century Palestine “Hebrew played a distinctly minor role in inscriptional evidence, as it did in the Diaspora to an even lesser degree.”

15. The ruins of the Gaza synagogue, built (or completed) in 508, was discovered in 1965 but have long since been demolished.

16. Although the Capernaum synagogue was discovered in the 19th century and partially excavated in the early 20th, much of what is now known about it came from excavations directed by the Franciscan Fathers between 1968 and 1986. Capernaum is the Greek and Latin rendering of the Hebrew *kefar nahum*, “village of Nahum.”

17. Cf. Levine 2000, pp. 196-97: “The building’s prominence was enhanced by the artificially raised podium on which it stood, dwarfing the nearby church of St. Peter.” For an excellent aerial view of the synagogue and surrounding structures see Levine’s Fig. 19, on p. 197.

18. For a general presentation of mosaic art in the Roman Near East see Chapter 11 (pp. 187-208) in Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For a detailed discussion of the zodiac mosaics in synagogues see Rachel Hachlili, “The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance,” *BASOR* no. 228 (1977), pp. 61-77. For good color photographs see Walter Zanger, “Jewish Worship, Pagan Symbols: Zodiac Mosaics in Ancient Synagogues,” in a 2011 “e-feature” of *Biblical Archaeological Review*. Wanger’s interpretation of the mosaics, however, is not persuasive. His photographs are accessible online at <http://www.bib-arch.org/e-features/synagogue-zodiacs.asp>

19. Hachlili 1977, p. 76.

20. On this see James Charlesworth, "Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Palestinian Synagogues," *HthR* 70 (1977), pp. 183-200. On the basis of mostly textual evidence Charlesworth declared (p. 183) "that we now possess undeniable evidence for Jewish interest in astrology by at least the first century B.C."

21. On Firmicus Maternus and the attractions of Jewish astrology in the third and fourth centuries see Feldman 1993, p. 379.

22. Hachlili 1977, p. 65. She notes that in the mosaics from the 5th and early 6th centuries the parallels with Sol Invictus are less clear: "Consequently, the earliest depiction of the sun god (Tiberias) in Jewish zodiacs is similar to one in Roman art, but develops into a stylized design which is more abstract and subdued."

23. This did not happen immediately. Constantine featured Sol Invictus on his triumphal arch, and continued to display Sol Invictus on his coins until 326. In 321 Constantine issued his "Sunday law": an edict making "the venerable day of the sun" a non-business day for government officials and for all urbanites and tradesmen (but not for agricultural workers).

24. An archaeological team from Akdeniz University has reported finding marble reliefs of a menorah and a shofar in excavations at Demre, near Antalya.

25. Levine 2000, pp. 269-70.

26. Levine 2000, pp. 271-72. Stobi was situated on the right bank of the Vardar river and on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road that ran from the Adriatic to the Aegean. The city was approximately a hundred miles northwest of Thessalonike.

27. The third-century date rests in part on Polycharmos' instructions that anyone altering the synagogue he has constructed must pay a fine of 250,000 denarii "to the *patriarches*." The patriarch intended would have been the head of the rabbinic academy at Sepphoris or Tiberias. The size of the fine is intelligible only in the middle and later decades of the third century, when runaway inflation diluted the denarius to less than a hundredth of its earlier value.

28. Marianne Palmer Bonz, "Differing Approaches to Religious Benefaction: The Late Third-Century Acquisition of the Sardis Synagogue," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993), pp. 139-154, explored the several phases of the building and suggested that initially (from ca. 225 until ca. 270) it served - among other things - as the meeting place of the city's *gerousia* (council of elders). See especially her arguments at pp. 142-43. At p. 148 Bonz proposes that the city's economic decline forced it to sell the building to the Judaeon congregation.

29. Beneath the mosaic floor of Inscription 3 (Kroll 2001, p. 17) a number of 3rd-century coins were found, the latest of which were two coins of Claudius Gothicus, posthumously struck. Claudius died in 270.

30. Levine 2000, pp 244-45. For a very different interpretation of the evidence see Jodi Magness, "The Date of the Sardis Synagogue in Light of the Numismatic Evidence," *AJA* 109 (2005), pp. 443-475. Magness argues that the final configuration of the synagogue dates to the sixth century. It would be remarkable, however, if such lavish synagogue construction continued during or after the reigns of Justin and Justinian.

31. Kroll 2001. At note 1 on p. 5 Kroll reports that six Hebrew words have been identified: two are the words for "peace," two for "vow," and two are proper names. All of the rest of the inscriptions are in Greek.

32. For the Greek text and the translation see Kroll 2001, p. 17. This is Inscription 3 in Kroll's publication.

33. Kroll 2001, p. 8.

34. Josephus *AJ* 14.259-61.

35. Little is known about early Christianity in Sardis other than the letter in Revelation (3:1-6) and multiple references to the second-century bishop and writer, Melito of Sardis. The name of no other bishop of Sardis has survived until that of Florentius, who is mentioned ("Florentius, the most reverend bishop of Sardis") in the *acta* of Session II at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

36. The temple at Mt. Gerizim nevertheless continued as the site for sacrifices until it was destroyed by the emperor Zeno at the end of the fifth century.

37. Levine 2000, pp. 175-76: "If this last suggestion is accepted, then Samaritan synagogue building would constitute an interesting chronological parallel to the appearance of the late third-century Jewish synagogues and may even be related in some way to this development." For traditions about Baba Rabba see Levine 2000, pp. 173-75, and for artistic parallels between Judaeian and Samaritan synagogues in the third and fourth century see Levine's note 50 on p. 176.

38. Marius Victorinus, *De homoousio recipiendo*, 1 (trans. Mary T. Clark). A celebrated Neoplatonist philosopher and orator who converted to Christianity, Victorinus was much indebted to Origen as well as to pagan Neoplatonists. His theology was abstruse enough that Jerome found it unintelligible, but Augustine greatly admired it.

39. For another view of Eusebius' attitude toward Judaeians see Barnes 1981, pp. 181-86.

40. For the story see Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.17: Soon after Constantine's victory over Licinius, Helena, directed by dreams, went to Jerusalem and found the Holy Sepulcher under a temple of Aphrodite that enemies of the Church had built in order to obscure what lay beneath it. In the sepulcher were three crosses, along with the written report of Pilate, which admitted that Jesus was indeed king of the Judaeians. Makarios, bishop of Jerusalem, determined which of the three crosses was Jesus' by bringing to the crosses a woman sick to the point of death. When exposed to two of the crosses she remained sick as ever, but on exposure to the True Cross was

immediately healed. Over the tomb Helena supervised the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and she left a part of the True Cross there. The other part she sent to her son the emperor, who enclosed it within his own statue, which stands now in Constantinople. Ever since, it has provided divine protection to the city. So, at least, it is averred by the residents of Constantinople.

41. At *HE* 3.5 Eusebius characterized the fate of Jerusalem in 70 as “the reward for the iniquity of the Jews and of their impiety against the Christ of God” (Kirsopp Lake translation). *HE* 3.6 is a long quotation from Josephus’ *BJ*, detailing the horrors of starvation in the city under siege. At *HE* 3.7.1 Eusebius repeated his initial characterization: “Such was the reward of the Jews’ iniquitous and wicked treatment of God’s Christ.” Eusebius did not mention Josephus’ conclusion that the main cause of the revolt was the Judaeans’ confidence that the Messiah was about to appear.

42. Augustine, *Civ. Dei* 18.46 (Bettenson trans.).

43. Five of the edicts in *Codex Theodosianus* 16.9 concern Judaeans’ ownership of Christian slaves.

44. *Codex Theodosianus* Book 16.8.1 (Clyde Pharr translation). On the dating of this and other edicts attributed to Constantine see Barnes 1981, pp. 392-93, note 74.

45. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.33 says that Caesarea was totally destroyed by Gallus, but this is an exaggeration. On the revolt see Arce 1987.

46. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.20: the first miracle was an earthquake, the second was fire from heaven that burned up all the workmen’s tools, and the third a luminous cross that appeared on all the workers’ garments and that could not be got rid of by washing.

47. Ambrose, *Epist.* 40.15.

48. Levine 2000, p. 242.

49. On Gerasa and Elche see Levine 2000, pp. 240 and 261-63..

50. Millar 1992, p. 115.

51. Drijvers 1992, pp. 141-42.

52. John Chrysostom, *Homilies against the Judaeans*, 1.6.7.

53. Ambrose, *Epist.* 40.14.

54. Ambrose, *Epist.* 40.15 appeals to ordinary justice: “But of course, if I were to talk in terms of the *ius gentium*, I would say how many basilicas of the Church the Judaeans burned when Julian was emperor. There were two at Damascus, one of which has barely been repaired - but at the expense of the church, not the synagogue - while the second is still in ugly ruins. Basilicas were

burned in Gaza, Ascalon, Berytus, and almost all such places, and nobody sought to exact punishment for these. A basilica was also burned at Alexandria by heathen and Judaeans and this one alone was greater than all the others put together. So, a church was not avenged, but a synagogue will be?" (At certe si jure gentium agerem, dicerem quantas Ecclesiae basilicas Judaei tempore imperii Juliani incenderint. Duas Damasci, quarum una vix reparata est, sed Ecclesiae, non synagogae impendiis: altera basilica informibus horret ruinis. Incensae sunt basilicae Gazis, Ascalonae, Beryto, et illis fere locis omnibus, et vindictam nemo quaesivit. Incensa est basilica et Alexandriae a gentilibus et Judaeis, quae sola praestabat caeteris. Ecclesia non vindicata est, vindicabitur synagoga?).

55. In a letter to his sister (*Epist.* 41) Ambrose repeated much of the sermon and summarized his conversation with the emperor.

56. *Cod. Theod.* 16.8.9: Idem aaa. addeo comiti et magistro utriusque militiae per orientem. iudaeorum sectam nulla lege prohibitam satis constat. unde graviter commovemur interdictos quibusdam locis eorum fuisse conventus. sublimis igitur magnitudo tua hac iussione suscepta nimietatem eorum, qui sub christianae religionis nomine illicita quaeque praesumunt et destruere synagogas adque expoliare conantur, congrua severitate cohibebit. dat. iii kal. octob. constantinopoli theodosio a. iii et abundantio cons. (393 sept. 29).

57. Levine 2000, pp. 262.

58. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 7. 13.

59. Parkes 1961, p. 230; Levine 2000, p. 107, n. 176.

60. Levine 2000, p. 240.

61. Millar 1992, pp. 119-20. For the text and translation, with commentary, of Severus' *Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* see now Bradbury 1996.

62. *Codex Theod.* 16.8.25.

63. *Codex Theod.* 16.8.29.

64. On the Diaspora in the third century CE see Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987, p. 82 "Outside Palestine and Babylonia-Iran (and, no doubt, some parts of Syria) nearly all Jews speak Greek; their Bible is in Greek, their services are held in Greek, according to Greek prayer-books, some (how many?) philosophically oriented, as we have seen."

65. Levine 2000, p. 447, n. 30. See BT, Tractate *Sotah*, Folio 32a.

66. Another Greek translation, this one credited to Theodotion, was completed before the time of Origen, who incorporated it into his *Hexapla*. Theodotion's version was produced for the benefit of the Ebionites, Judaeans Christians who rejected Paul and the New Covenant. The Ebionites produced yet another Greek version, or paraphrase, this one credited to a

second-century Ebionite named Symmachus.

67. On the Aramaic *targumim* see Tov 1992, pp. 148-51.

68. Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987, p. 22: "It is clear that a knowledge of Hebrew became widespread, and may have been compulsory, in the western diaspora from c. A.D. 400." See also their remarks on pp. 82-3: "Uniformity of liturgy and law would have been achieved by the imposition of compulsory Hebrew education for all, but that seems not to have been accomplished until the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries A.D., the beginning of our papyrological and epigraphical evidence of the widespread employment of Hebrew west of the land of Israel. Without a knowledge of Hebrew, there would be no uniformity of law." Note also Reynolds' and Tannenbaum's statement on p. 83: "It appears to be in the early Byzantine period that Jews begin to call themselves Ἑβραῖοι rather than Ἰουδαῖοι."

69. Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987, p. 83: "we do have papyrological evidence of a knowledge of Hebrew in the communities of upper Egypt c. A.D. 400: fragments of official letters to or from the heads of communities, in Hebrew, found in Oxyrhynchus, which was not an important Jewish centre; this would authorise us to believe that a knowledge of Hebrew is widespread among Jews throughout Egypt by this date. Another fragment provides a text that parallels, but does not reproduce, part of the text of the Mishnah: this might be from a rabbi's or a student's private notes, and if so would be evidence for the study of the Mishnah. Dated in the fourth century are fragments (still from Oxyrhynchus, of *piyyutim*, liturgical and devotional poems in Hebrew.. The Jerusalem Talmud shows Palestinian 'Amora'im of the early fourth century active in Alexandria, either in person or in written responses to legal consultation by Alexandrian rabbis."

70. See Levine 2000, p. 546: "The targum was a widespread, if not universal, practice in the synagogues of late antiquity, and certainly in Palestine and Babylonia, for which our information is relatively abundant. The Roman-Byzantine Diaspora remains an enigma in this regard, nor do we know whether the Torah was read in Hebrew or Greek in these communities (or if both, then the extent of each). Thus, the degree to which a *targum* was needed remains an open question."

71. Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987, p. 83, cite Hebrew epitaphs from the sixth century at Venosa (Venusia) in southern Italy and at Tortosa in Spain.

72. Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987, p. 83: "In Venosa, in a catacomb that is thought to date to the fifth or sixth century, a Latin inscription refers to two *rebbites*; if two rabbis are to be found in, or are visiting, a community as unimportant as that, rabbinism had taken over in Italy."

73. Levine 2000, p. 447, citing YT (JT), Tractate *Sotah*, 7, 1, Folio 21b.

74. BT, Tractate *Shabbat*, Folio 115a.

75. Schwartz 2001, p. 179: "In this part of the book I attempt to describe some aspects of the novel and distinctive Jewish culture that emerged in late antiquity (c. 350-640) as the integrative ideology of the Jews. In this chapter I will argue that one of the main causes of the rejudaization of the Jews was the christianization of the Roman Empire."

76. Justinian's *Novella* 146, issued in 553 CE, is no. 66 in Linder 1987. See also Jones 1964, vol. 2, p. 945.

77. Although not made available to the public through book-sellers, the Jerusalem Talmud was copied for use in the Tannaitic academies.

78. Epstein 1959, p. 127.

79. For a low estimate of 860,000 see Neusner 1965, vol. 2, pp. 124 ff. Grant 1984, p. 275, says of the Judaeans in Mesopotamia that "between AD 200 and 500 they may have increased in numbers from one million to two."

80. See especially the chapter "Byzantine Palestine" in Levine 2000, pp. 194-231.

81. Levine 2000, pp. 196-97.

82. See Jones 1964, p. 946: "The Jewish authorities had moreover a recognised voluntary jurisdiction in civil disputes. Disputes between Jews could be referred to them by consent of the parties, and their judgments were in such cases enforced by the imperial authorities."

83. The noun ὀρθοδοξία and the adjective ὀρθόδοξος were opposed to *heresy* and *heretic*. The term *orthodoxia* was used and perhaps introduced by Methodius, who died a martyr ca. 311. Methodius, who evidently was bishop of Olympos, in Lycia, is best known for his attacks on Origen. In his *On the Resurrection* Methodius insisted that Origen was wrong to say that the resurrected body will be unlike our physical bodies. The terms *orthodoxia* and *orthodoxos* became increasingly popular during the Christological arguments of the fourth and fifth centuries.

84. Bury 1923, vol. 2, p. 364. Jones 1964, p. 948, assigns much of this to Justin.

85. Bury 1923, vol. 2, p. 366. Cf. Schwartz 2001, 186: "And yet, even under Justinian, Judaism, unlike paganism and heresy, was never declared illegal (nor was it in medieval Christendom)."

86. Brown 1971, p. 174.