

## St. Ambrose and the Jews

388

**A**MBROSE (d. 397), Bishop of Milan, was one of the most notable of the Christian Fathers. A man of education and culture, his great courage and energy were never more evident than when defending the interests of the Christian church.

About the year 388 a bishop in Mesopotamia had encouraged the burning down of a synagogue in the town of Callinicum, a not uncommon occurrence. The Emperor Theodosius the Great (379-395) ordered him to rebuild it. Ambrose protested against this order in a letter to the Emperor, with whom he had great influence. However, when the letter did not have the desired effect he appealed in person to the ruler, and successfully, when he came to services.

The first selection below is an extract from Ambrose's letter to the Emperor. The second selection is an extract from Ambrose's letter to his sister in which he tells her of his successful appeal. Both letters were written in Latin in the year 388.

Nevertheless, five years later (393) Theodosius issued an order to the Count of the East to punish any Christian who attacked and destroyed synagogues.

I. AMBROSE, BISHOP, TO THE MOST CLEMENT PRINCE, AND BLESSED EMPEROR, THEODOSIUS THE AUGUSTUS. . . .

Ⓐ report was made by the military Count of the East that a synagogue [in Callinicum, Mesopotamia] had been burnt [about August 1, 388] and that this was done by the authority of the Bishop. You gave command that the others should be punished and the synagogue be rebuilt by the Bishop himself. I do not urge that the Bishop's account [of this riot] ought to have been waited for; for priests are the calmers of disturbances and anxious for peace, except when they, too, are moved by some offense against God or insult to the Church. Let us suppose that that Bishop was too eager in the matter of burning the synagogue and too timid at the judgment-seat; are you not afraid, O Emperor, that he may comply with your sentence; do you not fear that he may fail in his faith? [If the Bishop rebuilds

the synagogue he will be remiss in his duty as a Christian.] . . .

But let it be granted that no one will cite the Bishop to the performance of this task [the rebuilding of the synagogue], for I have requested your clemency; and although I have not yet read that this edict is revoked, let us notwithstanding assume that it is revoked. What if others more timid—because they shrink from death—offer that the synagogue be restored at their cost; or that the Count, having found this previously determined, himself orders it to be rebuilt out of the funds of Christians? . . . Shall the Jews write this inscription on the front of their synagogue: "The temple of impiety, erected from the plunder of Christians"? [The result would be a Jewish place of worship built of Christian funds.]

But perhaps the cause of discipline moves you, O Emperor. Which, then, is of greater importance, the show of discipline or the cause of religion? It is needful that censure should yield to religion. [The Christian religion takes precedence over the law.] . . .

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. . . .

And certainly, if I were pleading according to the law of nations, I could tell how many of the Church's basilicas [churches] the Jews burnt in the time of the Emperor Julian: two at Damascus, one of which is scarcely now repaired, and this at the cost of the Church, not of the Synagogue; the other basilica still is a rough mass of shapeless ruins. Basilicas were burnt at Gaza, Ascalon, Beirut, and in almost every place in those parts, and no one demanded punishment. And at Alexandria a basilica, which alone surpassed all the rest, was burnt by pagans and Jews. The Church was not avenged; shall the Synagogue be so? . . . [Ambrose says, in excuse, that the Jews destroyed churches during the reign of Julian the Apostate, 361-363. This accusation is not confirmed in other contemporary Christian sources.]

The buildings of our churches were burnt by the Jews, and nothing was restored, nothing was asked back, nothing demanded. Now, what could the Synagogue have possessed in a far distant town, when the whole of what there is there is not much; there is nothing of value and no abundance. And what then could the scheming Jews lose by the fire? These are artifices of the Jews who wish to calumniate us, that because of their complaints an extraordinary military inquiry may be ordered. . . .

Will you give this triumph over the Church of God to the Jews? this victory over Christ's people? this exultation, O Emperor, to the unbelievers? this rejoicing to the Synagogue, this sorrow to the Church? The people of the Jews will set this solemnity amongst their feast-days and will doubtless number it amongst those on which they triumphed either over the Amorites or the Canaanites, or were delivered from the hand of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, or of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. They will add this solemnity, in memory of their having triumphed over the people of Christ. . . .

On this point I pledge myself to our God for you, do not fear your oath. Is it possible that that should displease God which is amended for His honor? You need not alter anything in that letter, whether it be sent or is not yet sent. Order another to be written, which shall be full of faith, full of piety. For you it is possible to change for the better; for me it is not possible to hide the truth. . . . [Theodosius is asked to recall the order to rebuild the synagogue.]

## II. THE BROTHER TO HIS SISTER \*

¶ You were good enough to write me word that your holiness was still anxious, because I had written that I was anxious; so that I am surprised that you did not receive the letter in which I wrote word that satisfaction had not been granted me [as yet]. For when it was reported that a synagogue of the Jews and a conventicle of the Valentinians [Gnostic heretics] had been burnt by Christians, by the authority of the Bishop, an order was made, while I was at Aquileia [near Trieste], that the synagogue should be rebuilt and the monks who had burnt the Valentinian building punished. Then, since I gained little by frequent endeavors, I wrote and sent a letter to the Emperor; and when he went to church I delivered this discourse. . . . [The substance of the sermon was: if you don't take care of the Christians, God won't take care of you.]

When I came down from the pulpit, he said to me: "You spoke about me." I replied: "I dealt with matters intended for your benefit." Then he said: "I had indeed decided too harshly about the repairing of the synagogue by the Bishop, but that has been rectified. The monks commit many crimes." Then Timasius, the general of the cavalry and infantry, began to be over-vehement against the monks, and I answered him: "I deal with the Emperor as is fitting, because I know that he has the fear of God; but with you, who speak so roughly, one must deal otherwise."

\* Marcellina, a nun, a sister of Ambrose.

Then, after standing for some time, I said to the Emperor: "Let me offer for you without anxiety; set my mind at ease." [Ambrose will not perform the "sacrifice," the mass, till the edict is rescinded.] As he continued sitting and nodded but did not give an open promise, and I remained standing, he said that he would amend the edict. I went on at once to say that he must end the whole investigation lest the Count should use the opportunity of the investigation to do some injury to the Christians. He promised that it should be so. I said to him: "I act on your promise," and repeated: "I act on your promise." "Act," he said, "on my promise." And so I went to the altar. I would not have gone unless he had given me a complete promise. And indeed so great was the grace attending the offering [the mass], that I myself felt that that favor [rescinding the order] was very acceptable to our God, and that the divine presence was not wanting. And so everything was done as I wished.

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Pope Gregory the Great and the Jews  
590-604

**G**REGORY THE GREAT (590-604) is important in Jewish history because his attitude toward the Jew finally became the official policy of the Catholic church. This policy is an attempt to crystallize the status of the Jew as it had evolved under the Christian Roman emperors of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. It is most clearly expressed in the very last paragraph of the letter to Fantinus quoted below.

The first of the Latin letters given below shows Gregory's distaste for forced baptisms, although he himself was most eager to bring the Jews over to Christianity.

The second letter describes the great Pope's efforts to do justice to the Jews of Palermo, in Sicily. The bishop there, Victor, had seized and occupied a synagogue, and when he saw that Gregory objected, he quickly consecrated it as a church, making its return to Jewry impossible. Gregory attempted to correct this injustice by restoring to the Jews the value of the buildings and by instituting a search for the contents that had been carried off. The reason for this attitude of Gregory was a desire to adhere closely to the principles of the Roman law which already defined the privileges and the disabilities of the Jews. He himself did nothing, however, to improve their legal condition.

I. *June 591*—GREGORY TO VIRGILIUS, BISHOP OF ARLES, AND THEODORUS, BISHOP OF MARSEILLES, IN GAUL

¶(Though the opportunity of a suitable time and suitable persons for writing to your Fraternity [a term of respect] and duly returning your salutation has failed me so far, the result has been that I can now at one and the same time acquit myself of what is due to love and fraternal relationship, and also touch on the complaint of certain persons which has reached us, with respect to the way in which the souls of the erring should be saved.

Very many, though indeed of the Jewish religion, resident in this

province [Rome], and from time to time traveling for various matters of business to the regions of Marseilles, have apprized us that many of the Jews settled in those parts have been brought to the font of baptism more by force than by preaching. Now I consider the intention in such cases to be worthy of praise, and allow that it proceeds from the love of our Lord. But I fear lest this same intention, unless adequate justification from [a verse of] Holy Scripture accompany it, should either have no profitable effect; or there will ensue further (God forbid) the loss of the very souls which we wish to save.

For, when any one is brought to the font of baptism, not by the sweetness of preaching but by compulsion, he returns to his former superstition, and dies the worse from having been born again.

Let, therefore, your Fraternity stir up such men by frequent preaching, to the end that through the sweetness of their teacher they may desire the more to change their old life. For so our purpose is rightly accomplished, and the mind of the convert returns not again to his former vomit. Wherefore discourse must be addressed to them, such as may burn up the thorns of error in them, and illuminate what is dark in them by preaching, so that your Fraternity may through your frequent admonition receive a reward for them, and lead them, so far as God may grant it, to the regeneration of a new life. [Though Gregory was ready to force pagans into Christianity, he believed Jews should be converted only by preaching and example.]

II. *October 598*—GREGORY TO FANTINUS, DEFENSOR \* OF PALERMO

¶(A little time ago [in June] we wrote to Victor, our brother and fellow-bishop, that—inasmuch as certain of the Jews have complained in a petition presented to us that synagogues with their guest-chambers [for the poor and ailing], situated in the city of Palermo, had been unreasonably taken possession of by him—he should keep aloof from the consecration of them [as churches] until it could be ascertained whether this thing had actually been done, lest perchance injury should appear to have been alleged by the Jews of their own [ill] will. And, indeed, having regard to his priestly office, we could not easily believe that our aforesaid brother [Victor] had done anything unsuitably.

But, we found from the report of Salarius, our notary [a papal agent], who was afterwards there, that there had been no reasonable

\* Papal administrator.

cause for taking possession of those synagogues, and that they had been unadvisedly and rashly consecrated. [When Bishop Victor found out that the Pope wanted him to restore the synagogues he hastily consecrated them.] We therefore enjoin thy Experience [Excellency] (since what has been once consecrated cannot any more be restored to the Jews) that it be thy care to see that our aforesaid brother and fellow-bishop pay the price at which our sons, the glorious Venantius the Patrician and Urbicus the Abbot, may value the synagogues themselves with the guest-chambers that are under them or annexed to their walls, and the gardens thereto adjoining. Thus what he has caused to be taken possession of may belong to the Church, and they [the Jews] may in no wise be oppressed or suffer any injustice. [Gregory orders that the Jews be compensated for their losses.]

Moreover, let books or ornaments that have been carried off be in like manner sought for. And, if any have been openly taken away, we desire them also to be restored without any question. For, as there ought to be no license for them to do anything in their synagogues beyond what is decreed by law, so neither damage nor any cost ought to be brought upon them contrary to justice and equity, as we have ourselves already written. [Gregory here refers to his letter of June, 598, to Victor, Bishop of Palermo: "Just as one ought not to grant any freedom to the Jews in their synagogues beyond that permitted by law, so should the Jews in no way suffer in those things already conceded to them." This dictum was frequently repeated in the bulls of later popes.]

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*Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, XII-XIII. See Index under "Jews."

For an understanding of Jewish life in France in the sixth century, as seen through the eyes of a distinguished churchman, see E. Brehaut's translation of Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*. See the Index under "Jews"; "Priscus."

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