

A SHORT NOTE ON THE *DOCTRINA JACOBI
NUPER BAPTIZATI**

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After his reconquest of Jerusalem from the Persians in the year 630 CE, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–641) issued an order for the compulsory baptism of the Jews in his empire.¹ This stern decree had dramatic consequences for Jews in several regions of the Byzantine empire, even though it seems certain that the decree was not carried out everywhere. Many Jews became *Conversos avant la date*, and the Church Father Maximus Confessor (ca. 580–662) already stated unambiguously (in a letter of 632 CE)² that he feared that this compulsory baptism would lead to insincere ‘conversions’ on the part of the Jews. As a result of that understandable fear, Christian scholars began to instruct their coreligionists how Jews, after their compulsory baptism, could be talked out of their old beliefs and practices and be made sincere believers. The anonymous treatise with the telling title *Twenty-Five Questions to Corner the Jews* is an instructive instance of that new genre, actually a kind of conversion manual.³

Another more or less similar document from the same period is the equally anonymous *Teaching of the Recently Baptized Jacob (Didaskalia Iakôbou neobaptistou)*, more commonly known as *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*.⁴

* Again, I owe many thanks to my friend, Dr. James N. Pankhurst (Münster), for correcting the English.

¹ On Heraclius and his policy see A.N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. 1: 602–634 (Amsterdam 1968); J.F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge 1990).

² Published by R. Devresse, ‘La fin d’une lettre de Saint Maxime: un baptême forcé de Juifs et de Samaritains à Carthage en 632,’ *Revue des sciences religieuses* 17 (1937) 25–35.

³ For a translation with introduction and notes see P.W. van der Horst, ‘Twenty-Five Questions to Corner the Jews: A Byzantine Anti-Jewish Document from the Seventh Century,’ in E.G. Chazon, D. Satran and R.A. Clements, eds, *Things Revealed. Studies in Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honor of Michael E. Stone*. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 89 (Leiden 2004) 289–302. The Greek title of the treatise is *Ἐπαπορέτικα κεφάλαια κατὰ τὸν Ἰουδαῖον*.

⁴ The best edition (with a French translation) is V. Déroche, ‘Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati,’ *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991) 47–229. For a brief introduction see

This relatively long text, some hundred pages of Greek, is one of the most intriguing reactions to the compulsory baptism of Jews in the years after 632.⁵ It is a Christian document, written in the late 630s or early 640s, in which one finds a fictional report of an internal Jewish debate about the credibility of the new faith they have been compelled to adopt. Let me first give a brief outline of the contents and then raise the question of what we can learn from this text about the situation of the Jews in that crucial period.

The story, which is purportedly told by a newly baptized Jew named Joseph, is as follows:⁶ Heraclius' edict is carried out rigorously in the North-African city of Carthage by George, the prefect of Africa.⁷ A number of the forcibly baptized Jews of that city are so despondent that they convene secretly in the house of a certain Isaac (*Isaakios*) in order to deliberate what to do.⁸ Then a certain Jacob (*Iakôbos*), a Jewish Torah scholar (*nomodidaskalos*) and merchant from Constantinople, arrives in Carthage. He does not want to undergo forcible baptism and hence pretends that he is a Christian and behaves accordingly. However, when he steps into a hole and falls, he spontaneously shouts, 'Adonai, help me!,' and thus betrays himself as a Jew. He is taken to a bath and when the Christians see that he is circumcised, he is baptized against his will, but in a vision during the night he is told by a heavenly messenger that this is the right thing because Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God and the expected Messiah. He then borrows a Bible from a monastery, searches the Scriptures, and finds this message fully confirmed.

When meeting the Jews who convene in secret, he asks them why they are so down-cast. He is then invited to join them in their secret deliberations and that is the start of a long series of talks between Jacob, who has become a truly convinced Christian, and the other baptized Jews. These talks are rather monotonous in that they all follow the same

H. Schrekenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (1.–11. Jh.)* (Frankfurt 1990) 437–438; and H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im Byzantinischen Reich*. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft XII 2.1 (Munich 1959) 447. The text exists also in medieval translations into Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic.

⁵ A good analysis of this treatise and its historical background can be found in the above mentioned volume of *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): at pp. 17–46 one finds the 'Introduction historique' by Gilbert Dagron; and at pp. 230–273 one finds this scholar's and Vincent Déroche's 'Commentaire' on the text.

⁶ This is a very brief summary, omitting most of the details.

⁷ This George is also known from other contemporary sources (John Moschos, Maximus Confessor).

⁸ Dagron and Déroche, 'Commentaire', 231, sketch their feelings as follows: 'Les baptisés ont le sentiment de n'être plus juifs et pas encore chrétiens.'

pattern: the Jews ask Jacob short questions⁹ that make clear that they cannot believe the central tenets of Christian faith, whereupon Jacob proves at length from Scripture (the Septuagint) that all of these tenets were already foretold by the Law and the Prophets. With more than three hundred quotes from the Jewish Scriptures,¹⁰ Jacob demonstrates at great length that it is their own Bible that tells the Jews they should become Christians, which is so clearly God's will. No wonder that by the end of the story all Jews have turned into sincere Christians.

Still, the story is not all linear, for before that 'happy end' other events take place. The most important of these moments of retardation is the arrival of another Torah scholar, called Justus (*Ioustos*), this time from Palestine. This Jew demonstrates great anger because of Jacob's evangelistic and catechetical activities and furiously opposes him in an attempt to prevent the other Jews from becoming true Christians—he even attacks Jacob physically. But he, too, finally has to concede that Jacob's argument from Scripture (the '*doctrina Jacobi*') is irrefutable and converts to the Christian faith as well. This conversion blows away the final doubts that still might have remained in the minds of the other newly baptized Jews (3.1–12). In the preceding chapters one could already see that these doubts were gradually diminishing after each successful argument by Jacob. (One of the author's clever new devices is that he uses not Christians but Jews [Christian Jews, to be sure] in order to convince the newly baptized to adopt the new faith wholeheartedly, which makes the tone of the treatise different from most other *Adversus Judaeos* texts.)

A fascinating aspect of this document is that, although it is a patently wishful Christian presentation of an inner-Jewish dialogue that certainly never took place in that form,¹¹ the text nevertheless evinces at several places an intimate knowledge of things Jewish and of the life of Jews under Byzantine rule in the first half of the seventh century. Far from wishing to be exhaustive, I will give just a few examples.

⁹ For instance: Why can belief in Christ and observing the Sabbath not go hand in hand? Why would God have rejected the synagogue? How can we know that Jesus Christ is the Messiah announced by the Law and the Prophets? How could Jesus Christ's body have ascended? Is it true that not only Joseph but also the virgin Mary is from the tribe of Judah?

¹⁰ Most of these scriptural passages are simply repeated from the Christian *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the five preceding centuries. Even so, it is interesting to see that the interlocutors are plainly aware of the fact that several texts from the Psalms which are given a Christological explanation here, were interpreted by the rabbis as referring to the historical kings of Israel; see *Doctrina* 1.14 and 2.1.

¹¹ The heavy dependence upon earlier *Adversus Judaeos* literature makes that abundantly clear. See Dagron and Déroche, 'Commentaire', 250–256.

Cities of Palestine mentioned in the text as having a Jewish population alongside other inhabitants include Ptolemaïs and Caesarea, cities we know from other sources to have had a mixed population, including Jews. In Caesarea, Justus' brother Abraham (*Abraamês*) is said to live and there he learns about the Byzantine general Sergius' defeat by the Arabs (*Sarakênoi*), which took place in 633 and raised enthusiasm among the Jews of Palestine because they hoped that 'the prophet' (Muhammad) would liberate them from the oppressive Byzantines. One of Abraham's interlocutors, however, a learned Jew from Sykamina (Shiqmona at the foot of Mt. Carmel),¹² seriously doubts this and remarks that Muhammad must be a false prophet, since real prophets do not appear armed with a sword, and he adds that people who met the man did not find anything prophetic about him but heard much talk of massacres (5.16).¹³

When talking about Ptolemaïs (Acco), the Jews mention specific sites such as 'the mill close by the cargo ships and the customs office' (5.6), where as youngsters they met on the Sabbath (apparently, several of the Jews of Carthage originated in Ptolemaïs). All this sounds authentic, the more so since such details are unrelated to the message of the *Doctrina Jacobi*. We are also told about Jewish attacks on the Christians of Ptolemaïs during the Persian conquest of the city in 614 CE (4.5).¹⁴ As we know from other sources, similar events took place in Jerusalem and other places of Byzantine Palestine during the Persian conquest.¹⁵ A Christian named Leontius, who was caught in that conflict in Ptolemaïs, was compelled by the Jews to convert to Judaism and was later reported sitting in front of the synagogue under the portico alongside the Mesê (4.5), a lively and precise detail that suggests that the author knew the site personally. This impression is confirmed when the author adds that

¹² On what we know about this predominantly Jewish town see Dagron and Déroche, 'Commentaire', 242–243.

¹³ On early Jewish reactions to Islam see R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton 1997), *passim*.

¹⁴ Specific details mentioned include setting fire to churches, theft of precious manuscripts from the episcopal library, pillaging, molesting and murder of Christians. See A. Sharf, *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade* (London 1971) 49. Armed assaults by Jews on Christians had probably taken place already in the sixth century if the suggestion by some scholars is correct that (the) Jews sided with the Samaritans in the latter's anti-Byzantine uprisings in 529 and later that century. For this period see A.D. Crown, 'The Byzantine and Moslem Period,' in Crown (ed.), *The Samaritans* (Tübingen 1989) 55–81.

¹⁵ See Dagron, 'Introduction historique', 22–23.

shortly afterwards this Leontius committed suicide in the house of a certain Gemullus, an unhappy ending that does not at all sit comfortably with the message of the *Doctrina Jacobi* as a whole. The Samaritan quarter of Ptolemaïs is said to be situated on the seaside and this is again mentioned in passing (4.5).

What Jacob tells in *Doctrina* 1.40 about the often extremely violent relations between the Jews on the one hand and the hooligan-like circus factions of the Blues and Greens on the other (including the strange alliance between Jews and Blues) also confirms what we know from elsewhere.¹⁶ All this makes a reliable impression, the more so since the author adds details about Jacob's personal involvement in several of these events, including no less than seven place names where the fighting took place, elements that do not really add to the message of the author. Another feature to be noticed is that both teachers of Torah, the *nomodidaskaloi* Jacob and Justus, are said to have been merchants. If we might regard these two scholars as rabbis (or at least as students of rabbis), this would imply a striking confirmation of information from other sources to the effect that some rabbinic scholars were indeed engaged in business.¹⁷ Another element in the *Doctrina Jacobi* that is confirmed elsewhere is that members of Jewish communities that were located far apart kept in touch with each other. According to our document, which has been confirmed by other sources, members of communities in Palestine remained in contact with coreligionists that lived as far away as Carthage.¹⁸

In *Doctrina* 1.42, Jacob tells about a great Torah scholar from Tiberias who had constructed a genealogy of Jesus' mother Mary, in which a man named Panther also played a role (albeit not as Jesus' father). This not only fits in with the fact that Tiberias was the main rabbinic centre of the Land of Israel in that period, but also with rabbinic statements about Pandera as Jesus' father.¹⁹ He also refers to a Jewish tradition that

¹⁶ See P.W. van der Horst, 'Jews and Blues in Late Antiquity,' in D. Accorinti and P. Chuvin (eds), *Des Géants à Dionysos. Mélanges de mythologie et de poésie grecques offerts à Francis Vian* (Alessandria 2003) 565–572, reprinted in my *Jews and Christians in Their Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen 2006) 53–59.

¹⁷ See, e.g., L.I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem 1989) 69; esp. C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen 1997) 261–262 and Index 557 *s.v.* trade. Unfortunately, I had no access to Y. Dan, 'Two Jewish Merchants in the Seventh Century,' *Zion* 36 (1971) 1–26 (in Hebrew).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Hezser, *Social Structure* 169–171; E.S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA 2002) 232–252.

¹⁹ See P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton 2007) 15–24. It is interesting that

Adam's skull was buried at Golgotha (5.13), which is not fully correct although there was indeed a tradition of Jewish exegetical speculation about the site of Adam's tomb in the land of Israel.²⁰

In *Doctrina* 1.21, the newly baptized Jews speak about their former teachers and authorities as *hoi pateres hêmôn kai nomodidaskaloi*, 'our fathers and doctors of the Law.' This is a *hendiatys* (the copula being a *kai explicativum* here): the 'fathers' are the teachers of the Law. This is strongly reminiscent of the frequent use of *avoth* for the rabbinic sages (see, e.g., the title of the Mishna treatise *Avoth*), from which it had been almost certainly derived.²¹ And when the author has the Jews refer to their synagogue as *hagia synagôgê* (holy synagogue), it suggests that he is familiar with the increasing use of the epithet 'holy' for the synagogue by Jews in late antiquity attested in a variety of other sources.²²

Much more could be said about this fascinating document, but this may suffice to make clear that the *Doctrina Jacobi* deserves more attention than it has hitherto received on the part of Judaic scholars. It has a unique and exceptional place in the tradition of ancient Christian *Adversus Judaeos* literature. As Gilbert Dagron rightly observed, 'Sa mise en scène romanesque et son scénario stéréotypé ne prédisposent guère en sa faveur, mais la lecture révèle une date (13 juillet 634)²³ qui, même si elle est un peu arrangée, n'est nullement fictive, la biographie d'un héros, un solide ancrage dans une géographie méditerranéenne et dans un milieu de Juifs palestiniens commerçant en Afrique, enfin une quantité d'événements saisis à chaud, sur la portée desquels on s'interroge.'²⁴ What is badly needed is an English translation of this text accompanied by a detailed historical-philological commentary. Hopefully one of my readers will take up this challenge.

in another Byzantine legend, found in the tenth-century encyclopedia called Suda, one encounters the motif of a Jewish genealogical document about Mary that was kept hidden in Tiberias; see P.W. van der Horst, 'Jesus and the Jews according to the Suda,' in idem, *Hellenism—Judaism—Christianity: Essays on their Interactions* (Leuven 1998) 161–170.

²⁰ See P.W. van der Horst, 'The Site of Adam's Tomb,' in M.F.J. Baasten and R. Munk, eds, *Studies in Hebrew Literature and Jewish Culture Presented to Albert van der Heide on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought 12 (Dordrecht 2007) 251–255.

²¹ Note also that in *Doctrina* 1.22 the Jewish historian Josephus is called *ho sophos Ioudaios*, 'the Jewish sage (*hakham*).'

²² See S. Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame, IN 1997).

²³ In *Doctrina* 5.20 Jacob is said to have left Carthage after the talks on July 14, 634 CE.

²⁴ Dagron and Déroche, 'Commentaire', 230.