

Christian icon practice in apocryphal literature: consecration and the conversion of synagogues into churches

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Introduction

At some point in the 1st c. A.D., the synagogue of Lydda, a city in Judea, was converted into a church through the deceptive actions of a prominent member; this forms the main plot of the *Story of Joseph*, an apocryphal narrative from late antiquity.¹ When Joseph, the disciple who provides for Jesus' burial in the Gospels, returns to Lydda, near his native village of Arimathea, he agrees to renovate the synagogue and to supply its liturgical instruments. Instead, the modified building is consecrated as a church by the apostle Peter, who arrives from Jerusalem. The outraged Jewish community appeals to the Roman governor in Caesarea to settle the ensuing dispute over ownership. After having closed the building for 40 days, the governor arrives at Lydda and enters. Inside, an image of the Virgin Mary *theotokos* has emerged miraculously, prompting the governor to award the building to the Christians. The icon of Mary denotes the building as an exclusively Christian space and prevents the Jewish community from entering.

The *Story of Joseph* is clearly tendentious, an anachronistic projection into the apostolic era of the Christian community's eventual ascendancy in a former Jewish stronghold; its events are portrayed as inevitable and divinely ordained. Yet there are the similarities between the *Story of Joseph* and the attack on a synagogue in Cagliari, Sardinia, in the spring of A.D. 599, which is recorded in the correspondence of Pope Gregory of Rome with Januarius, the bishop of Sardinia (*Letter 9.196*):²

Jews from your city have come here and complained to us that Peter, led over from their superstition to the cult of the Christian faith, on the day after his baptism, that is, on the Sunday of the very Easter festival, gathered certain undisciplined men around him and, in a grievous scandal and without your consent, occupied their synagogue which is in Cagliari; and he installed there an icon of the mother of our Lord and God and a cross to be worshipped, and a white vestment that he had worn when rising up from the font. On this matter, letters from our sons Eupaterius, the glorious general, and the magnificent governor, Spesindeo, and other nobles of our city have agreed in their witness to these matters for us.

Like the *Story of Joseph*, this incident involves a converted Jew who attempts to appropriate a synagogue with his new co-religionists; instead of the miraculous appearance of a Marian icon, they bring their own portable image to consecrate the building as a church. Finally, the Jewish community in Cagliari also appeals to an imperial authority in the form of Gregory, a representative of Constantinople. The pope, unlike his fictional counterpart in Caesarea, rules in the Jews' favor.

The point in comparing these two very different sources is not to suggest that one account or event influenced the other. But I do want to call attention to the potential relevance of

1 The text is extant only in Georgian, translated from a Greek original. The critical edition and French translation is in van Esbroeck 1978. The editor dates the text to the 5th or 6th c.

2 The Latin text is in Norberg 1982. My translation is a modified version of the English translation in Martyn 2004.