

# On the Baptism of Slaves Belonging to Jews (to Adalard, Wala, and Helisachar)

Agobard of Lyon

Translated by W. L. North from Agobardi Lugdunensis Opera Omnia, Opusculum VI, ed. L. Van Acker, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis 52, Turnholt: Brepols, 1981, pp. 115-117.

## Introduction

The second of Agobard's writings against the Jews (the first was, according to B. Blumenkranz, a text on the baptism of Jews circulated in manuscripts of the canonical collection of Florus of Lyon), this letter was directed to three high-ranking members of the imperial court. Agobard sought their help in protecting prelates' ability to baptize pagans who were the property of Jews and their intervention in cases where the Jews refuse to sell the individual or charge an excessive price for their freedom. The work was probably composed ca. 823. Like his other writings on the Jews, this plea attests to the status of Jews in the Carolingian world at this time and the complex cultural conditions which Agobard believed to foster or compromise Christian conversion. This text also provides evidence, albeit ambiguous, on the *magister Judaeorum*, a Carolingian officer who seems to have been in charge of "Jewish affairs" in the realm. On this office, see B. Bachrach, Early Medieval Jewish Policy in Western Europe, Minneapolis, MN 1977, 99-101.

On this work, see B. Blumenkranz, Les auteurs chrétiens latins du moyen age sur les juifs et le judaïsme, Études juives 4, La Haye 1963, pp. 157-8.

## Text

To <my> most reverend and blessed lords, both lords and holy fathers, Adalard,<sup>1</sup>[1] Wala,<sup>2</sup>] and Helisachar.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, just after we had been granted the opportunity to return <home> from the palace, your sweetest loves sat and listened to me grumbling rather than speaking against those who bolster the complaints of the Jews. And after you heard these things

---

<sup>1</sup> Abbot of Corbie.

<sup>2</sup> Count.

<sup>3</sup> Abbot of Saint-Riquier.

and we moderated what we said to each other, you all arose and I followed. You entered into the sight of the prince<sup>4</sup> and I stood before the door; after a little while, you had me come in, but I heard nothing except <his granting us> permission to leave. But what you said to the most clement prince about the aforesaid matter, how he took it, what he said in response, I did not hear. I did not come to you afterwards because my cowardly embarrassment got the better of me and a troublesome <thought>, which came to me not so much from the course of events as the ignobility of my own mind, wore me out.

I therefore went away troubled, I began my journey uncertain, I arrived home confused, and I settled back down afflicted. I would describe the causes of this affliction, but I fear to belabor your kindness. Nevertheless, the bearer of this letter can tell you all about it, if your patience allows.

I make known to your prudence certain matters which I think clearly should not be kept secret and which prompt me to address myself to your most faithful paternity. First, it is absolutely necessary for me and, in my opinion, for all, to know that you deign to give advice that accords with divine work on what should be done about pagan servants of the Jews whom they have purchased. For although raised among <the Jews>, these persons learn language among us, they hear about the faith, they see the celebrations of the solemn festivals, and they are pricked by these things towards the love of Christ and they desire to become members in the body of the Church, members of Christ. They flee to the Church, asking for baptism, that is to say, whether we must deny this to them or offer it when we can.

On this matter, I in fact hold the following opinion. Clearly, every human being is a creation of God, and in any person, even though he be a slave, a greater share is held by the Lord God – Who created him in the womb, led him forth into the light of this life, has maintained the life He granted, and has preserved his health – than by the man who enjoys the service of his body after paying twenty or thirty *solidi*. And no one doubts that each servant, although he owes the work of his body's members to his carnal lord, owes the religion of his mind to the Creator alone. Consequently when holy preachers – the allies of the apostles – taught and baptized all the nations, they did not wait for the carnal lords' permission to baptize servants as if it was not fitting that they be baptized unless their lords allowed it. Instead, knowing and preaching that servants and lords have one Lord God in heaven, they baptized all, brought all together within one body, and taught that all were brethren and sons of God, yet in such a way that each would remain in his calling not by zeal but by necessity, and indeed so that

---

<sup>4</sup> King and Emperor Louis the Pious (814-840).

those who were able to become free might profit more [cf. I Cor. 7:20-4].

One should also readily and reasonably gather that, if a pagan flees to Christ and we do not receive him but rather reject him because of his carnal lords, it is impious and cruel, since no one can be lord of the human soul except the creator. Indeed, we also think that one should consider the fact that when a religious emperor leads an army against the nations who are alien to the name of Christ and, having emerged the victor, subjects them to Christ and joins them to religion, it is a work of piety and worthy of praise. How then can we turn a blind eye when among such subjects there are those who desire baptism? Nor are we saying that the Jews should lose what they paid in such cases. But when we offer prices according to the established [prices] of earlier times, the Jews do not accept it, because they suppose that the masters of the palace will favor them and they desire something more for them than for others who claim what was said above.

These are the things concerning which we beseech your counsel or the command of the lord emperor through you. This would, of course, not be necessary if the fellow who is master of the Jews attended [to the matter] as you said that he should. For if he considered our ministry in good faith in accord with your command, just as we want to show honor to him in his ministry, then there would be no need to do injury in the asking, unless it was for the sake of an increase of doctrine. Indeed, if he had just wanted to act reasonably, there would not have been any discord or contention regarding the cases of the Jews.

Deal with us according to the love that the Holy Spirit diffuses in your hearts and apply consolation to your servant, because I am tortured by different worries in great fear. For if we deny baptism to Jews or those seeking it, I fear divine damnation. If we give it, I fear human offense and the grievous wounding of our house.<sup>5</sup> Because I thought it unworthy to write about these lesions and discords in this note, I have sent along a small summary (*breviculum*) to your piety, by which you may know what they are.

It would be unworthy of your happy kindness to become angry with me because I am importunate in making such complaints to you; instead consider that it is the Church's cause, the reason of the faith, and a divine work. I have the greatest faith in your sanctity; therefore, take up this holy labor for the sake of divine repayment and help out our Church by bringing it aid and instructing it. For you are indebted to us for the vast amount of confidence that we have in you.

---

<sup>5</sup> I.e., the church of Lyons.