

## **JEWISH ROOTS in CALABRIA** (Italy) by Prof. Francesco Gallo

Legends state that Reggio Calabria was founded by **Aschenez**, a great grandchild of *Noah* and that many Jews emigrated to Calabria (thus, starting the "Jewish Diaspora") after Roman Emperor **Titus** (30-81 AD), during the Jewish-Roman War in 70 AD, captured, sacked and destroyed Jerusalem and its **Temple** (see **photo** below).



The **Old Temple of Jerusalem** as it was **before its destruction** in 70 AD

When **Titus** destroyed the Temple, he also looted all precious works of art and metals as can be seen on the relief sculptures of Rome's **Arch of Titus** (see **photo** below)



This **treasure**, was brought from Jerusalem to Rome that **Alaric** (370-410), King of Visigoths, occupied in **410** AD and on his way to Africa, he passed by **Cosenza** where he died from malaria. His body and the treasure are believed to be buried under the bed of where the Busento and Crati Rivers meet (see **photo** below).



Other legends mention that it was the Hellenized Jews from Egypt who introduced the citrus fruit **etrog** ("cedro" in Italian for "cedar") in Calabria before the Magna Graecia thirteen centuries BC. In fact, the prized etrog, known as the **Diamante** Citron, also known as the "Yanover Etrog", is still grown in Calabria today (see **photo** below of rabbis selecting perfect cedars). The Calabrian town of "**Santa Maria del Cedro**" still features their etrog heritage in its place name. It is believed by some Jews, especially the Chabad-Lubavitch, that **Moses** (1391-1271 BC) used a Calabrian etrog during the first holiday of **Sukkot** ("Feast of the Tabernacle" or "Festa della Capanna") which celebrates the Jewish exodus from Egypt. During the summers, many Rabbis come to the "**Riviera of Cedars**" from Tortora to Cetraro, in the province of Cosenza, to enjoy the climate but also to bring back the precious fruit.



Rabbis choose cedars with a perfect conical shape and with no stains on the skin.



Jerusalem was seiged in **63 BC** by the Roman general **Pompeius** (106-46 BC). This meant the end of Jewish independence and the incorporation of **Judea** as a Kingdom of the Roman Republic.



During Roman times, Calabria was called "**Brutium**" and had two parts, "**Ultra**" (the south) and "**Citra**" (the north). Based on research by Professor Cesare Colafermina, in the year **132 AD Emperor Hadrian** (76-138) completely destroyed Jerusalem following the **Bar Kokhba revolt** (see **photo** below), a rebellion of the Jews against the Roman Judea, led by Simon Bar Kokhba.

Some Jews then fled to the Calabria town of **Bova Marina** (Reggio Calabria), then called Scyle, where they built a synagogue which faced east, in the direction of Jerusalem, and which remained active until the VI century. After the one in Ostia, this synagogue was the second oldest of the western world. The Calabrian Jewish community in Bova Marina became so prosperous that it was the object of envy and complaints during the reign of the Roman **Emperor Honorius** (393-423) and in the VI century the community abandoned Scyle. In 1983, the rests of this ancient synagogue were discovered (see **photo** below).



The mosaic floor of the synagogue of Bova Marina a seven- branched candelabrum, an etrog and a palm branch

**Tertullian** (155 – c. 240? AD) from Carthage, was the first Christian to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature where a clear division between Christianity and Judaism can be first noticed.

**St. John Chrysostom** (347-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, delivered eight sermons (homilies) against the Jews in Antioch where he attacks not only the teachings of Judaism, but also their way of life, their avarice and viciousness, accusing them of missionary activity which competed with that of Christians. The defeated and dispersed Jews, he ironically added, were becoming the teachers of the whole world. Chrysostom attempted to defame the synagogue, which he compared to a pagan temple.

Other Jewish communities were in **Reggio Calabria** (*Rhegion*) and in **Catanzaro** (*Katantheros*). Reggio was an important naval base for the Romans. It attracted the Jews who occupied its southern area known as "Anzara" and contributed to make the city a primary commercial center of the Mediterranean Sea.

Following Constantine's **Edict of Milan** of **313 AD**, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

"When Christianity began, Judaism was the dominant tradition in the Holy Land and expressed its ideas within a political framework until the early fifth century. Christianity was subordinate and had to operate against the background of a politically definitive Judaism. From the time of Constantine onward, matters reversed themselves. Now Christianity predominated, expressing its ideas in political and institutional terms. Judaism, by contrast, had lost its political foundations and faced the task of working out its self-understanding in terms of a world defined by Christianity, now everywhere triumphant and in charge of politics" (Jacob Neusner, p. X).

"In the fourth century the two heirs of ancient Israel's Scriptures, Judaism and Christianity, laid claim to the Land of Israel/the Holy Land. Constantine and his mother dotted the country with shrines and churches, so imparting to the geography of the land a Christian character. Israel for its part, was losing its hold on the Land of Israel, as the country gained a Christian majority. Here, in Genesis, sages found evidence for Israel's right to hold the Land" (Jacob Neusner, p. 19-20, 23, 40).

Since Romans were now friends, Christians could no longer blame them for Christ's death but had new culprits, the Jews who because of this, began suffering discriminatory practices and persecution. According to Christian documents, in **Luke's Gospel** 23:14, **Herod**, the Roman King of Judea, reports: *"..having examined him before you, found no fault in this man of those things whereof ye accuse him...nothing worthy of death hath been done by him"*.

Also, in **Matthew's Gospel** 27:25, **Pontius Pilate**, the Roman Governor of Judea, is described as a weak person who succumbed to the will of Jewish authorities (Judaic high priest **Caiaphas**) who wished to execute Christ. It was the Jewish religious leaders ("Pharasees") who reported to Roman authorities that a revolutionary leader ("Christ") was preaching in various places of Judea.



When the crowd chose to crucify innocent Jesus over the criminal Barrabas, Pontius Pilate (see **photo** below) as he washed his hands, said to the crowd: "*I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it*". Then, all the people answered: "*His blood be on us, and on our children*". Finally, **John** the Evangelist, in verse 19-16, wrote that the Jews had physically killed Jesus after Pontius Pilate surrendered him to them.

Throughout history, the Christian world blamed the Jews for Jesus' death but strictly speaking, we're all guilty of Jesus' blood because He died for all our sins!



**Julian** (330-363) who was a Roman **Emperor** from **361** to 363, rejected Christianity, defended the Jews and promoted Neoplatonic Hellenism. This caused him to be remembered by Christians as **Julian the Apostate**.

**St. Jerome** (347-420) born in Dalmatia, known particularly for his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, believed that the Jews were not God's chosen people.

**Theodoric the Great** (454-526), King of the Ostrogoths and King of Italy, defended and protected the Jews. Calabria was part of the land he ruled from Ravenna, the capital city.

From the IV to the X centuries there are no sources describing Jewish presence in Calabria but in the early X century Calabria was devastated by Arab raiders, the Jewish population being among the worst sufferers.

**Saint Nilus** (910-1004)



praised the qualities of the Jewish physician **Shabbetai Donnolo** (913-982- see **photo**) who lived in the Calabrian town of **Rossano** (CS) and who in 970 wrote the "Book on Mixtures" ("Sefer ha-Mirkahot"), the first medical text in Hebrew and who probably was one of the founders of the Salerno School of Medicine.

In **1095**, Pope **Urban II** (1035-1099) orders the First Crusade to conquer the Holy Land. In **1099** **Godfrey of Bouillon** (1060-1100) conquered Palestine and became known as the "Defender of the Holy Sepulchre"

**Peter the Venerable** (1094-1156), abbot at Cluny (France), organizer of the First Crusade, defined Jews as " *beasts who do not understand anything*". **Saint Bernardino** of Siena (1380-1444) in his sermon " *Tractatus de contractibus et usuris*", encouraged the government to confiscate the money Jews gained with usury. However, **Joachim da Fiore** (1130-1202), an abbot and theologian of San Giovanni in Fiore (CS), hoping that our "elder brothers" would be converted to Christianity, in his publication " *Adversus Judaeos*" ("Against the Jews"), abandoned the concept of " *perfidia judaeorum*", a Pontifical definition of Jews by Pope Innocent IV as "Christ killers". Although it was never proven that he had Jewish origins, he often met with Jewish scholars. A neophyte (a Jew converted to Christianity) named "**Simon**" built the Church of St. Zechariah in Castelvetro (today "Caulonia"). Many times, the Christian faith of neophytes was just a façade and thus, distrust emerged and were subjected to strict controls by the Inquisition.

During the **Middle Ages**, Calabrian Jews occupied many **economic activities**, such as, dairy products, silk, wool, leather, dying of clothes, tailors, ropery, jewelers, coppersmiths (especially in Dipignano CS, a typical image of the "wandering Jew"), collection of salt and manna, cultivation of cedars, sugar cane and liquorice. Their businesses flourished especially during the time of Frederick II (1198-1250). In 1400 Catanzaro had the main silk market of Italy. Nevertheless, Jews were forbidden to purchase a Christian slave or convert Christians to Judaism.

When **Charles I** of Anjou (1226-1285) conquered Italy in **1266**, he introduced anti-Semitism, forcing Jews to be converted to Christianity even if he extended many privileges Jews enjoyed. In **1270** he ordered Jews and Christians of Nicotera and Seminara to pay 136 ounces of gold for the damages they had caused to his soldier **Pietro of Monteleone** during the war against Conradin Hohenstaufen (1268). After **1288**, under **Charles II** of Anjou, persecutions and attacks were fomented by Dominican friars in Calabria, as in the rest of the kingdom. About half of the 2,500 Calabrian Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity or abandoned Calabria to escape being mistreated.

However, in Castrovillari (CS) in 1264, as the **Blessed Peter Cathin of Sant'Andrea**, a disciple of St. Francis of Assisi, tried to convert the wife of Parrasio, a rich Jewish merchant, it is believed that he was killed by Jews by forcing him to wear a red-hot helmet. Queen **Johanna II** of Anjou-Durazzo (1371-1435), influenced by the Franciscan friar **Saint John of Capistrano** (1386-1456), annulled all the privileges Jews had but allowed them to lend money at a 34% interest.

In **1311** Duke Charles of Anjou, to guarantee the safety of Jews in **Gerace** (RC), intervened during Holy Week when the zeal of Christians against Jews was particularly inflamed. From **1491** to 1494, the Summaria intervened with the authorities of **Strongoli** (KR), **Cariati** (CS) and **Altomonte** (CS) to condemn violence against Jews especially during Holy Week.

Starting near the end of the XIII century, many violent riots (**pogroms**) took place to massacre or persecute Jews, burn synagogues, assault Jewish homes, plunder stores, kill men and rape women. Jewish men were forced to grow a beard and to wear a circular yellow badge while women had to carry a dark blue cloth on their heads. Those who were converted to Christianity (**neophytes** or **Marranos**) were exempt from paying taxes and their names were changed into those of distinguished families.

Jewish communities settled voluntarily or by force in segregated areas ("**ghettoes**") where they could build synagogues, practice circumcision on their infants, set up butcher shops with kosher meats, open private schools to learn Hebrew and about Judaism by using the **Bible**, the **Talmud** and the **Torah**. The Calabrian towns of Reggio Calabria, Catanzaro, Nicotera, Nicastro, Cosenza, Montelone and Castrovillari had such ghettoes.

Their business was mainly based on silk, wool, cotton, clothing, jewellery, wax, paper, books, oil, wheat, wine, saffron and cattle. Not all Jews were rich bankers and wealthy merchants; some were physicians, chemists, artisans, peddlers and small retailers. One of the main activities of Jews in **Reggio Calabria** was the dying of clothes and in **Catanzaro** the weaving of silk. Jewish physicians did not care for the spiritual well-being of their sick patients who died without receiving the sacrament of Confession, Holy Communion and Extreme Unction and orthodox Christians complained about this to the Pope.

During the Middle Ages, Jews contributed to improve **Calabria's economy** through their silk, leather, soap, hat and dying industries. Many lived in **Nicotera** where in addition to having an important shipyard, it had the largest Jewish ghetto of Calabria, attracting other Jews from Spain and Sicily ("**Sephardic Jews**"). Not far from Nicotera, there was a small town called "**Crapassito**", today "**Belsito**" (CS), a name derived from the Hebrew "**Kapar-Ha-Sseeth**", meaning "an important village".

Suspicion against the Jews was so strong that in **1348** the German Jews were accused of having caused the **black plague** by poisoning city wells. Local citizens murdered 200,000 Jews but many escaped to settle in various places including Calabria ("**Ashkenazi Jews**").



In **1468** King **Ferdinand I** issued a decree for Calabrian Jews, it lowered **usury interest rates** to 24% for sums above 50 ducats and to 36% to those below (Queen Joanna in mid-1300s had set it to 45% and King Ladislaus in late 1300s to 40%). In 1473 Jews of Cosenza charged a 30% interest rate. The Catholic Church prohibited Christians from lending money, charging interest.

In **1493** the Communes of **San Lucido** (CS) and **Tropea** (VV) obtained the promise from the King Ferdinand I that the newly arrived Jews from Sicily would enjoy the same tax exemptions as native citizens.

Until 1494, Jewish life in Calabria flourished with **privileges** granted by **Ferdinand I** but ironically, there is a legend that Judas, the Apostle who betrayed Christ, is thought to be born in Scalea (CS). In 1465 the Jews coming to the **Fair of Maddalena** of **Cosenza** obtained the privilege of having to answer only to the king's official in charge of the fair.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1475 the first **Bible in Hebrew** was printed in Reggio Calabria by Avrhaham Ben Garton and today it's preciously preserved in Parma's Palatine Library (see **photo** below).



With the advent of the **Aragonese** who in **1442** succeeded the Angevins, Jewish life flourished in Calabria to such a point that every village had a Jewish settlement. In **1464** the citizens of Cosenza asked King for equal rights for the Jews but this was strongly opposed by Archbishop **Pirro Caracciolo** (1452-1481) of Cosenza. In **1481 Ferdinand I** granted Jews the following **privileges**: they were not to be subjected to the jurisdiction of city officials, they could address themselves to any notary or judge they chose, they would be taxed only according to the actual number of households but no Jew would be exempted from taxation, except the king's physician. Thus, prior to the Inquisition in the late 1492, more than 50% of the entire population of Calabria was Jewish.

Yet, in **1492**, the **Spanish Inquisition** began and Jews were expelled from Spain (they had been expelled from England in **1290** e from France in **1394**).



In **711 Tarik Ibn Ziyad** (670-720) was a commander of **Moors** who initiated the Muslim conquest of Visigoths in **Spain**. It lasted about seven centuries during which especially in Andalusia, there was great tolerance for different religions and great progress was achieved in science, poetry and music. Muslim Spain had the largest Jewish community (about 200,000) in Europe.

In **1553, pope Julius III** ordered to burn all copies of the book "Talmud" supported by Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto (1514-1585), born in Guardavalle (CZ) and the former rabbi Andrea De Monte (1510-1587) who was a Catholic convert. Many Jews left Spain ("Sephardic Jews") and settled in Calabria especially after the death of Ferdinand I in 1494. A short-lived revival of the Calabrian Jewish communities began after Sephardic Jews fled from Spain and Sicily. **Sephardic Jews** ("Sepharad" means "Spain") who are from areas around the Mediterranean Sea, including Portugal, Spain, the Middle East and North Africa, must be distinguished from **Ashkenazi Jews** ("Aschenaz" means Germany) who came from central and eastern Europe.



With the death of Ferdinand I in **1494**, Jewish fortunes began to decline: intolerance and violence broke out after the **invasion** of the Kingdom of Naples by **Charles VIII** (1470-1498) of France because he claimed to have a right to occupy its throne since his grandfather Charles VII, King of France, had married Marie of Anjou (1404-1463) of the ruling family of Naples until 1442. The French had allied with the Duchy of Milan and used Swiss mercenaries. The occupation lasted until 1498 during which the Jews were persecuted mercilessly, their synagogues closed and they had to wear a badge. They destroyed **Cosenza's** "Cafarone" area, the Jewish living quarter between via Padolisi

and Corso Telesio (near the Monastery of the Vergins). The word "cafarna" means "a large number of people" and it refers to the ancient city of "Cafarneum" of Galilee.

This pushed Jews to abandon Calabria to settle mostly in Turkey. In 1496 **Ferdinand II** liberated Naples and resumed control of the Kingdom.

In **1510**, Jews were **expelled from Calabria**, causing economic, social and cultural decadence of the territory. In **1520** they were readmitted but in **1540** they were expelled permanently. Most went to the Greek cities of Arta, Corfu and Thessaloniki, to Turkey and to Rome.

They had tried to avoid expulsion by becoming Christian converts (**Neophytes** or **Marranos**) and **italianized** their **last names** to recall names of Italian cities (Aiello, Cosenza, Milano, Belmonte) or professions (cordary, smith, goldsmith, apothecary). If the Pontifical Holy Office found out that Neophytes or Marranos falsely claimed to be Christians, while secretly adhering to Judaism ("**Crypto-Jews**" or "**double-loyalty**"), they risked the death penalty. Once they left, many synagogues were converted into Catholic churches and the Christian money lenders that arrived from Genoa and Venice, proved to be worse usurers than Jews. Pawnshops were introduced but they had very little money to lend.

In **1555** **pope Paul IV** (1476-1559) issued the anti-Jewish papal bull "**Cum nimis absurdum**" to prohibit Jews from owning property or obtaining a college degree, forcing them to wear a yellow recognition badge (physicians and usurers were exempt) and live in "ghettoes" where they could sell tatters and used clothes.

In **1739**, realizing how the economy had seriously worsened, the Bourbon King of Naples **Charles III** (1716-1788) invited Jews to return to his Kingdom to resume their previous important roles but the **clergy** strongly opposed it and in 1746 Jews were definitely expelled.

In 1798 **Illuminism**, the Jacobins, the French Revolution and **Napoleon Bonaparte** granted freedom to Jews who could settle anywhere but after the **Congress of Vienna** (1814-1815) with the Bourbon restoration, Jewish persecution was resumed (except for Livorno where Jews enjoyed freedom).

During the Reign of Sardinia and Piedmont, **Charles Albert's Statute of 1848** terminated discrimination against Jews, fully recognizing their civil rights and abolishing ghettoes, measures that continued after the unification of Italy under the Savoy dynasty.

On November 17<sup>th</sup> **1938** the **Italian Racial Laws** were promulgated to restricted civil rights of Jews (but also gypsies, communists, socialists and homosexuals) ban their books, exclude them from public office and higher education, expropriate and confine them in camps or send to confinement in small islands or towns. In **1940** the Italian Dictator, **Benito Mussolini** built the **internment camp of Ferramonti** (CS) in the town of Tarsia. Many of the prisoners were Jews from all over Europe who had fled to Italy to escape the Holocaust. The neophyte **Ernst Bernhard** (1896-1965), the originator of Jungian psychotherapy in Italy, together with 302 Jews, were confined in Ferramonti where Bernhardt stayed from June 25<sup>th</sup> 1940 to February 24<sup>th</sup> 1941 after which he was moved to the small town of **Lago** (CS) remaining from February 25<sup>th</sup> 1941 to April 12<sup>th</sup> 1941. There he appreciated the hospitality and warmth of the local people and the panorama of the Tyrrhenian Sea similar to that of Palestine. Please realize that Ferramonti was not a concentration camp where inmates were subjected to forced labor and then exterminated ( the "**Shoà**") .

**Israel** was created in **1948** as the first Jewish State in 2,000 years. It had its origins in the Zionism movement, established in the late XIX century by Jews in the Russian Empire who called for the establishment of a territorial Jewish state after enduring persecution. In 1917, Britain issued the "**Balfour Declaration**," which declared its intent to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine and this was authorized by the League of Nations in 1922. Since it protects Jews from anti-Semitism, some Jews left Calabria to settle in Israel.

In **1965**, the **II Vatican Council** with its "**Nostra aetate**" declared that Jews bear no responsibility for Jesus' death and that Jews and Christians shared a common spiritual origin (**Abraham**). It is ironic and tragic that Christianity, which began as a Jewish sect, became such a dangerous threat to Judaism. Up to that point, Jews were considered "deicides" who had crucified Christ.



In April 13<sup>th</sup> 1986, **Saint John Paul II**, visited the Jewish Synagogue in Rome and said "*Judaism is intrinsic to Christianity*".

The **photo** shows when St. John-Paul II meets rabbi Elio Toaff (on the right)

In 2007, Calabria consecrated its first synagogue in 500 years. The Ner Tamid del Sud Synagogue in the town of **Serrastretta** (CZ), serves the regional Jewish community. It was founded by Jews escaping persecution, because its remote, mountain location offered greater protection. They are the **anousims** — Hebrew for 'the forced ones' — because their ancestors had to denounce their faith to remain in Italy. This community began with the efforts of a progressive Rabbi, **Barbara Aiello**. Her organizational efforts have led some Italian Americans of Calabrian descent to search for their Jewish roots. She directs the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IJCCC).

Even if the Jewish cultural and social contribution is often forgotten by modern writers, the Old Jewish tradition is observed in Calabrian popular customs.

Cedar is perhaps the oldest bond that unites Calabria to Jews. It is thought that its cultivation was spread in Calabria by Hellenized Jews during Moses' time, XIV centuries before Christ.





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