

# *HISPANIA JUDAICA BULLETIN*

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## Between Edom and Kedar Studies in Memory of Yom Tov Assis

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## **“Fear God, my Son, and King” Relations between Nahmanides and King Jaime I at the Barcelona Disputation<sup>1</sup>**

Harvey J. Hames

*This article examines the nature of the relations between Nahmanides and King Jaime I of the Crown of Aragon as portrayed by the former in his account of what happened at the Barcelona Disputation in 1263. Based on how he understands the nature of kingship in his biblical commentary, Nahmanides portrays his relationship with the king as one of almost equals and in his description of events, it is he and the king who set the agenda rather than Ramon de Penyafort and Friar Paul. This “special relationship” goes a long way in explaining the structure and content of the Hebrew text.*

The Catalan *Mahzor*, dated ca. 1280, contains a *piyut* (liturgical poem - מִסְתַּגְּבִי) for the Rosh ha-Shanah morning service entitled “I will reveal my deeds to the King” attributed to Nahmanides (the first letters of each verse form an acronym of Moses ben Nahman Gerondi) in which the following is found:

You have put a candle at my feet, to guide my path  
You will search all the chambers of my stomach  
with the spirit of my generosity  
And when I left Your presence, You warned me  
Fear God, my son, and King.

These lines make up one of the two-line couplets of the *piyut* which each end with reference to the King, implying God. The last line of this couplet though, seems to be a little problematic: in a direct citation from Proverbs (24:21), God warns the author, the son, that he must fear God, but that he must also fear the King. The King could, of course, simply be another reference to God, but it might also be referring to flesh-and-blood kings within whose earthly domains Nahmanides and his Jewish contemporaries found themselves. This is the opinion of the biblical commentator Rashi (1040-1105), who comments that a person should fear the

1 This article is dedicated to the memory of a scholar and a gentleman, Yom Tov Assis. It is supported by the I-CORE Program of the Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Israel Science Foundation (grant no: 1754).

earthly king as long as he does not lead one away from the fear of God.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the warning given to the author before leaving the divine presence is a reminder that there is a king above as well as one below. Some of the other couplets of this *piyut* could also be read with this *double entendre* implying that while the Jew stands in judgment before the heavenly court on this Day of Judgment, he must also take into account the nature of his relationship and standing with the earthly court.<sup>3</sup>

Nahmanides (ca. 1195-1270) wrote his biblical commentary over a long period of time, and manuscript evidence shows that he revised parts of the commentary when he arrived in the Land of Israel towards the end of his life. One clear example of this revision relates to Nahmanides' own personal experience of seeing the distance between Jerusalem and Rachel's Tomb, leading him to correct an earlier statement in his commentary where he supported David Qimhi's opinion over that of Rashi.<sup>4</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, Nahmanides has quite a bit to say about kings, their ambitions and the relations between them and their minions, particularly with regard to Nimrod, the first king mentioned in the Bible, and Abimelech, the king of Grar and Khis dealings with Abraham (and Isaac). Nahmanides develops a political theory which could elucidate how he perceived the nature of his own relations with the Count-King Jaime I of Aragon, who ruled from 1213-1276, which in turn could also shed light on the events surrounding the Barcelona disputation in July 1263.

There are two accounts of the Barcelona disputation; one in Hebrew authored by Nahmanides, and a much briefer anonymous notarial account in Latin.<sup>5</sup> While there is some agreement between the two texts, particularly in relation to the subjects to be discussed, both accounts were written for different audiences, and consequently, they differ greatly in their presentation of what happened. The Latin account, given the royal imprimatur, is cleverly crafted to establish the superiority of the Christian interlocutor, Friar Paul, over his Jewish opponent,

2 Rashi on Proverbs 24:21.

3 *Maḥzor Catalonia*, Jerusalem, National Library, Ms. Heb. 6527, fols. 34v-36v. For the quotation, see especially fol. 35r, lines 6-7 **נר לרגלי שמת לנתיבתי, תחפוש כל חדרי ירא את יי בני ומלך, בטן ברוח נדיבתי, ובצאתי מלפניך הזהרת אותי, ירא את יי בני ומלך.** The *piyut* was edited by C.B. Chavel in *The Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1964, pp. 392-394.

4 See E. Feliu, 'El comentari sobre el Pentateuc de Mossé ben Nahman', *The Life and Times of Moses ben Nahman*, Gerona 1994, pp. 196-197 (Gen. 35:16).

5 For the Hebrew account, see C.B. Chavel, ed., *The Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1963, pp. 302-320 (Hebrew) [hereinafter: *Vikuah*]. For the Latin version, see Y. Baer, 'A Critical Look at the Disputations of Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and Nahmanides', *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), pp. 185-187. For an English translation of both texts, see H. Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, London 1993.

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and to demonstrate how the post-biblical Jewish texts can be profitably used to establish Christian truth. Nahmanides is contrasted with the rabbinical texts in the sense that whereas the latter are authoritative and cannot be false, the former is a consummate liar. The Hebrew text is more literary in form and is constructed to undermine the Christian interpretation of the rabbinical texts and to show that Jews have little to fear from the new Christian argumentation.<sup>6</sup> Looking at what happened at the disputation according to the Hebrew account, through the lenses of Nahmanides’ biblical commentary, provides a more nuanced reading of that momentous event, at least from the latter’s perspective.

Nahmanides’ relationship with the Count-King Jaime I has been the stuff of legends going back to the fourteenth century. One such legend recounted by the late fifteenth-century historian Abraham ben Shemuel of Tortutiel, who was among those expelled from Spain in 1492 and who updated Abraham ibn Daud’s *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, suggests that Nahmanides was one of the king’s teachers in matters of wisdom.<sup>7</sup> Another legend relates that his famous sermon, *Torat ha-Shem Temimah*, praising the Torah above all other things, was actually delivered before the king; in reality, it was more than likely preached to the Jewish community, perhaps in the aftermath of the Barcelona disputation.<sup>8</sup> Yet another legend found in Elijah Capsali’s *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* has the king acknowledging the greatness of God after witnessing the wondrous deeds achieved using practical Kabbalah, and indeed he asks for a blessing, though it seems that this was given by a Kabbalist from Ashkenaz rather than by Nahmanides.<sup>9</sup>

In his commentary on the Torah, Nahmanides’ negative depiction of Nimrod,

- 6 See the analysis of R. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response*, Berkeley 1989 and J. Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Ithaca and London 1982.
- 7 See A. Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles and Chronological Notes*, vol. 1, Amsterdam 1970, p. 95. F. Baer, *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden im Königreich Aragonien während des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1913, p. 36, n. 84. Also A. Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History*, Princeton 1954, p. 478. See Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 1, Philadelphia 1961, p. 408, n. 36a. See also E. Haverkamp, ‘Abraham ben Solomon of Tortutiel’, *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, Brill Online, 2012. [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-the-medieval-chronicle/abraham-ben-solomon-of-tortutiel-SIM\\_00012](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-the-medieval-chronicle/abraham-ben-solomon-of-tortutiel-SIM_00012) [24 May 2012].
- 8 See C.B. Chavel, *The Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. 1, pp. 139-140 (Hebrew) who suggests that it was delivered after the king and other Christians left the synagogue on the Saturday following the end of the disputation.
- 9 Elijah ben Elkanah Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, Books 1-3, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 1976-1983, Book 2, paragraphs 51-52, vol. 1, p. 168. See also R. ben Shalom, *Facing Christian Culture: Historical Consciousness and Images of the Past among the Jews of Spain and Southern France during the Middle Ages*, Jerusalem 2006, pp. 340-343 (Hebrew).

the first biblical king, and of his political and military ambitions may reflect his understanding of the role and ambitions of the ruler with whom he was familiar, Jaime I. Differing from the opinion of previous commentators, Nahmanides explicates the verses (Gen. 10:8-12) dealing with Ashur going forth to build Nineveh as referring to Nimrod's conquest of lands belonging to the family of Shem, thus expanding his empire. While this comment may have been influenced by contemporary geopolitical events such as the conquests of Jaime I during the early part of his reign, which included the Balearic Isles, Valencia and parts of Murcia, thus radically expanding his kingdom, Nahmanides clearly does not see Jaime I in the same light as Nimrod. For Nahmanides, Nimrod, who was the first king, wished to become the supreme power under the heavens, and corrupted all with which he came into contact. He was a negative figure who did more bad than good.<sup>10</sup> This is in distinction to Abimelech, the king of Gerar, whose conduct in relation to Abraham is considered exemplary, as he treated Abraham as if he were a king as well.<sup>11</sup>

Though not explicitly stated in his commentary on Genesis, Nahmanides seems to contrast Abraham with Nimrod, in that the former, because of his belief in God, had greater standing than the latter, whose hubris led him to think that he could be greater than God.<sup>12</sup> Abraham therefore represents the opposite pole to the tyrannical and anthropocentric rule of Nimrod. He places God at the center and by so doing, even though not a real king, he achieves preeminence. Moreover, even though he is prepared to use force, as in the battle of the four kings against the five, Abraham is willing to negotiate treaties and to respect the status of others. As a result, Abraham is treated by others, such as the people of Hebron from whom he purchases the Cave of Machpelah as a burial place for Sarah, as a prince, because of "the strength of his iconoclastic ideas".<sup>13</sup>

In an article dealing with Nahmanides' hermeneutical approach to the Torah, Amos Funkenstein demonstrated that Nahmanides developed and applied a theoretical framework for the use of typology, particularly in relation to the deeds of the forefathers in Genesis. He suggests that there is little doubt that Nahmanides adopted this hermeneutical approach from his Christian contemporaries and that he is the first Jewish biblical commentator to adopt this method of interpretation. Nahmanides views "the deeds of the forefathers as typological (*siman*) for the

10 C.B. Chavel, ed., *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1960, pp. 68-69.

11 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 119-120 (Gen. 20:2) "but this king was simple and straight".

12 According to Nahmanides (based on Rashi), Abraham and Nimrod actually met in Ur Kasdim. Nimrod was the king who threw Abraham into the furnace or incarcerated him for spreading the word about God. Neither event is actually mentioned in Scripture. See *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 71-72 (Gen. 11:28).

13 See J.A. Diamond, 'Nahmanides on the Polis: Reading Exegesis and Kabbala as Political Theory', *Hebraic Political Studies* 4, 1 (2009), pp. 56-79, especially pp. 66-77.

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sons”. He understands the Hebrew *siman* in this well-known dictum as pointing to actual historical events in the future which can be learned from the stories and episodes about the forefathers related in the Torah.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the forefathers’ journeys to various places such as Egypt typologically represent the various exiles which would be experienced by the Jewish people, and the war between the four kings and the five represents the four kingdoms that will rise and fall before the eventual redemption. Hence, Abraham’s relations with the various kings with whom he came into contact, as explained by Nahmanides, can possibly be seen as typological *exempla* for the subsequent relations of the Jews with the Christian kings by whom they were ruled. In the context of the Barcelona disputation, Nahmanides seems to have read his own situation and political standing through this typological prism.

Nahmanides’ depiction of his relationship with Jaime I, king of Aragon, as it emerges from the Hebrew text of the Barcelona disputation seems, to a certain extent, to mirror Abraham’s relations with the kings with whom he interacts in Genesis. For Nahmanides, Jaime I is neither Nimrod nor Abimelech, though he exhibits some of the traits of both, but his dealings with Nahmanides are conducted in a manner that brings both these kings, along with Abraham himself, to mind. In a manner of speaking, Nahmanides becomes Abraham in the sense that his dealings with the Aragonese king are presented as following along similar contours. Though Nahmanides’ polemic with Friar Paul is at the center of the Hebrew text, it is his relationship with the king which is pivotal for the way things develop, at least as presented by Nahmanides in his version of the events. In his mind, it is his relationship with the king that provides the rationale for the disputation with Friar Paul and allows him to adopt an attitude of superiority to his Christian interlocutor. This attitude of superiority is justified by Nahmanides’ hermeneutical interpretation of the biblical text and the implications of that reading. It is this special relationship between himself and the king presented in the Hebrew text which gives his interpretation of the events of 1263 their central structure and meaning.<sup>15</sup>

14 A. Funkenstein, ‘Nahmanides’ Typological Reading of History’, *Zion* 45 (1980), pp. 35-59 (Hebrew). See also M. Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition*, Jerusalem 2006, pp. 219-228 where he shows that Nahmanides’ use of typology goes well beyond that of the Christians and is connected to his meta-historical understanding of cycles. See also the important study by H. Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*, Tel Aviv 2003, pp. 23-24, 182-187.

15 The literature on the Barcelona disputation is vast and varied. See, for instance, H. Denifle, ‘Quellen zur Disputation Pablos Christiani mit Mose Nachmani zu Barcelona 1263’, *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 8 (1887), pp. 225-244; Y. Baer, ‘A Critique of the Disputations of R. Yehiel of Paris and of Nahmanides’, *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), pp. 172-187 (Hebrew); C. Roth, ‘The Disputation of Barcelona (1263)’, *Harvard Theological Review* 43 (1950), pp. 117-144; R. Chazan, ‘The Barcelona

In Nahmanides' view, it is the king who determines the rhythm of the disputation, not the Dominicans led by Ramon de Penyafort and Friar Paul. In other words, if the disputation was the brainchild of the Dominicans, it was taken out of their hands by the king, and in many ways, it is the interaction between the king and Nahmanides, as presented in the Hebrew text, that dictated how the disputation developed and determined its outcome. In the text, Nahmanides presents his relationship with Jaime I as one of almost equals (like Abraham and the biblical kings), and he feels that the king values his opinion over and above that of people such as Ramon de Penyafort, the king's confessor and former minister general of the Dominican order.<sup>16</sup> This depiction of the context and *dramatis personae*, which is subjective and entirely dependent on Nahmanides' own perspective and agenda, is fleshed out in the Hebrew text in the way that the king is portrayed in contrast to the Dominicans and Friar Paul in particular, and by the things the king supposedly says and does before, during and after the disputation.

The opening and concluding paragraphs of the disputation focus on Nahmanides' relationship with the king. While there has been some disagreement as to whether the opening passage of the treatise from Tractate Sanhedrin, which was censored in the printed versions of the Babylonian Talmud, was originally part of the text, it presents the rationale for the whole event (the passage appears in the earliest more-or-less complete copy of the disputation from 1387, now in Cambridge University Library<sup>17</sup>). It presents a disputation between some Rabbis and five of Jesus' disciples based on the interpretation of biblical verses in which their names appear, and from which their fate, which is not good, may be learned.

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"Disputation" of 1263: Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response', *Speculum* 52 (1977), pp. 824-842 and his *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 67-85; J. Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, pp. 108-128; M.A. Cohen, 'Reflections on the Text and Context of the Disputation of Barcelona', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 35 (1964), pp. 157-192; H.J. Hames, 'Reason and Faith: Inter-religious Polemic and Christian Identity in the Thirteenth Century', *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, Y. Schwartz and V. Krech, eds., Tübingen 2004, pp. 267-284; R. Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1992; and N. Caputo, *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community and Messianism*, Notre Dame 2007, pp. 91-127. See also H.J. Hames, 'Rethinking the Dynamics of Late Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemics: From Friar Paul to Alfonso de Valladolid', *Cultural Hybridities: Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Mediterranean*, B. Catlos and S. Kinishota, eds., Valencia, forthcoming 2014.

16 On Ramon de Penyafort, see J.M. Mas i Solench, *Ramon de Penyafort*, Barcelona 2000.

17 Ms. Cambridge University, Add. 1224.2, fol. 12r. On the extant manuscripts of the disputation, see U. Ragacs, 'Geordnete Verhältnisse: Zur vermuteten Interdependenz der hebräischen Manuskripte der Disputation von Barcelona 1263', *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 36 (2010), pp. 85-94 especially 87-89.

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The end of the citation from Sanhedrin reads: “And Rabbi Shim’on wrote: They (the disciples of Jesus) were close to royalty, and it was therefore necessary to reply to their idiotic proofs”. Nahmanides adds: “And in the same manner, I write here things that I replied to the ridiculous claims of Friar Paul, who overplayed his hand in public (*hikdiah tavshilo ba-rabim*) in front of our lord the king, may his majesty be uplifted and his kingship praised, his wise men and councilors”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, like the aforementioned talmudic quotation which indicates that the debate with Jesus’ disciples was about biblical hermeneutics and was only held because the disciples had royal support, Nahmanides states here that he, too, was obliged to participate because the Dominicans had royal backing. However, Nahmanides goes even further, intimating a closeness to Jaime I that the talmudic Rabbis did not have with their king, and he passes judgment on the abysmal performance of Friar Paul – an opinion he seems to suggest was shared with “our king, may his majesty be uplifted and his kingship praised”. In the same manner as that in which the talmudic Rabbis summarily dismissed the arguments of their Christian interlocutors, Nahmanides indicates his awareness that he was in no personal danger, for he could answer as he did because he was as close to the king as were the friars.

The king commands Nahmanides to take part in the disputation; however, Nahmanides feels confident enough, even in light of this royal order, to pose a condition: that he be allowed to speak freely “according to my will” (*kirtsoni*) or “as I please”.<sup>19</sup> Being able to act “as one pleases” is one of the attributes that Nahmanides assigns to the first biblical king, Nimrod, and to Ephron the Hittite who sells the cave of Machpelah to Abraham to use as a burial plot for Sarah.<sup>20</sup> In the latter case, Abraham uses Ephron’s greed to his own benefit by acquiescing to his will, thus gaining much prestige amongst the people of Hebron. Another interesting utilization by Nahmanides of this possessive noun (*kirtsoni*) is with Abimelech, the king of Garar, who, when signing the treaty with Abraham, inverts what would be considered the natural relationship between a king and subject,

18 *Hikdiah tavshilo ba-rabim* appears in tractate Berakhot 17b. C.B. Chavel, in his notes *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 1, explains it as “who went out to bad society”, but that does not seem to be the meaning here.

19 *Vikuah*, p. 302, para. 2.

20 C.B. Chavel, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 1, pp. 68 (Gen. 10:9), 131 (Gen. 23:15) respectively. Nahmanides also uses the possessive form to depict the extent of Christianity’s power towards the end of times (the tenth king of the fourth of the kingdoms according to the scheme of Daniel). Esau’s descendant, Magdiel (Gen. 36:43) prefigures the Christian king of Rome whose power will be felt all over the world and who will do as he pleases, hence his name, the etymology of which is “greater than any god” (*Commentary*, p. 204). Nahmanides also talks in the same way about the Messiah who will impose his will on all the nations. See *Commentary* on Gen. 49:10, p. 267.

bowing instead to Abraham's will (*ve-la 'asot kirtsono*) due to his love and esteem for him.<sup>21</sup> Hence, Nahmanides' use of this noun in his own demand to be allowed to speak as he will, and indeed receiving the required permission even though Friar Paul tries to place limitations on his free speech, is an indication of how he viewed his own status vis-à-vis the king, as well as of the king's appreciation of Nahmanides. Nahmanides also returns several times to the fact that he is only participating in the disputation because the king wills it, implying that as in the case of Abraham and Abimelech, there is mutual respect between the two.<sup>22</sup>

There is an interesting exchange between Nahmanides and the king at the end of the first day of the disputation which reveals some ambivalence on the part of Nahmanides towards the king, but also indicates confidence in his own status. According to the Hebrew text, Jaime I intervenes in the discussion with his own opinion about one of Nahmanides' responses. Though not mentioned in the Hebrew text as one of the conditions agreed upon at the start of the disputation, Nahmanides says to the king: "One of the conditions was that I would not argue with you and that you would not take part in the disputation", but he then goes on to respond to the king's comment. The discussion centered on the question of how long the Messiah can live, with the king scoffing at the idea that he could live more than a thousand years. Nahmanides reprimands the king, citing the examples of Methuselah, Elijah and Enoch, and then reminds the king that "life is in the hands of God". However, the king then asks, if the Messiah was indeed born on the day the Temple was destroyed, as suggested in the *midrash* cited by Friar Paul, "where is he now?" Nahmanides' response is as follows: "This issue is not central to this disputation and I will not answer you. Perhaps you will find him [the Messiah] at the gates of Toledo if you send one of your messengers there". And then, as an aside, Nahmanides added, "I said this in mockery".<sup>23</sup> The Talmud states that the Messiah is sitting at the gates of Rome; Nahmanides' response to the king is clearly more than just a play on the whole concept as it was clear to all, from the way it was said, that the Messiah would not be found at the gates of Toledo.<sup>24</sup> However, Nahmanides did not suggest sending messengers to the gates of Gerona, Lérida or Valencia, which were all part of Jaime I's royal domains. Toledo was the capital of the Kingdom of Castile, where his son-in-law Alfonso X (the Wise) was the ruler, and by pointing out the limitations of Jaime I's power and influence, as well as emphasizing the ridiculousness of Friar Paul's handling of the Jewish texts, Nahmanides was expressing his discontent with the king's intervention. This, seemingly, upset the balance between himself and the Dominicans which he believed had been agreed upon at the start of the disputation

21 Idem, vol. 1, p. 131 (Gen. 23:15).

22 *Vikuah*, p. 304, para. 10.

23 Ibid., p. 307, para. 31-34.

24 B.T, Sanhedrin, 98.

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with the support of the king. The king was reneging on an agreement which, according to Nahmanides’ understanding and portrayal of their relationship, subtly gave him moral superiority and the upper hand in the disputation.

At the start of the next session of the disputation, however, which took place in the cloisters either of the Cathedral or of the Dominican priory in Barcelona, Nahmanides gave the king a more serious reply. After a long discourse on the nature of the Rabbinic sources, including the famous comment about the supposed non-authoritativeness of *agadot*, or “sermones” as he called them, Nahmanides turned to the king saying:

And you, our master and king, asked, “Where is he [the Messiah] to be found?” and the answer is that he is in the Garden of Eden, waiting for the correct time to appear, and the aforementioned *midrash* which placed him at the gates of Rome only suggests that at one specific moment in time, the Messiah was to be found there.<sup>25</sup>

Nahmanides adds, as a side comment to his Jewish readers, that he did not want to tell the king that the Messiah sits at the gates of Rome because he will eventually destroy it, as this might not have gone down well with the large Christian audience. However, at the end of this paragraph, Nahmanides adds something of great import which negates the supposed imbalance created the previous day by the king’s scoffing intervention: “And I told all this to the king in private”.<sup>26</sup> Nahmanides portrays his relationship with the king as being so positive that he could tell him about the impending destruction of Rome, i.e. the Church, without fearing the consequences. This comment is important for an understanding of the dynamics of the disputation itself, as it suggests that there was a public veneer to the disputation, but also a private agenda agreed upon between Nahmanides and the king. As the opening paragraph suggests, the disputation was not to the liking of either, but both knew that they had no choice but to play the game by the rules, each for his own reasons. This indicates that Nahmanides intentionally portrayed his relationship with the king as one of almost equals, similar to the way Abimelech treated Abraham, and was prepared to hear what he had to say, even if it was not to his liking.

This reading is strengthened by what happened on the Sunday, some ten days after the disputation ended. A day earlier, the king, together with Ramon de

25 *Vikuah*, p. 309, para. 40-42. On Nahmanides’ approach to the *agadot*, see M. Fox, ‘Nahmanides on the Status of Aggadot: Perspectives on the Disputation at Barcelona 1263’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989), pp. 95-109 and S. Yahalom, ‘The Disputation of Barcelona and the Status of Aggadah according to Nahmanides’, *Zion* 69, 1 (2004), pp. 25-43 (Hebrew) and the bibliography cited there.

26 *Vikuah*, p. 310, end of para. 42.

Penyafort and Friar Paul, visited the synagogue in order to preach to the community according to the practice of the mendicants when granted royal license to do so.<sup>27</sup> There can be little doubt that unlike the disputation, the nature of this visit was for the purpose of conversion, and Nahmanides' response to the king's sermon, the subject of which was to show that Jesus was the Messiah, and to the sermon of Ramon de Penyafort, which dealt with the Trinity, clearly indicates this. Unlike the disputation itself, which focused on how the Jewish biblical and post-biblical texts demonstrated the truth of the Christian belief that the Messiah had already come – a line of argumentation easily countered by Nahmanides – here he was compelled to reply to the arguments in support of these central Christian articles of faith put forward by the king and the senior Dominican with counter-arguments of his own.<sup>28</sup> Here he had to make a case that directly addressed the absurdity of the arguments put forward in support of these Christian dogmas with no reference whatsoever to the authoritative texts of either faith. However, there is a clear difference between his reply to the king and to Ramon de Penyafort:

The words of our Lord the king, spoken by an excellent and honorable ruler, of whose like there is no other in the world have been heard [lit. seen] by excellent and honorable princes. However, I cannot praise them saying that they are true, for I have clear proofs and other things which light up like the sun that show that the truth is different from what he said. But it is not right to argue with him.<sup>29</sup> But one thing that I will say is that I am very surprised by the arguments he proposed in order that we should believe that Jesus was the Messiah. For it was Jesus himself who conveyed his teachings to our ancestors, and it was he who tried to persuade them, and to his face, they [the Rabbis] totally and strenuously denied them. And he [Jesus] could state the truth of his teachings better than can the king because, according to your tradition, he is God. And if our ancestors who

27 On royal licenses, see J. Riera i Sans, 'Les llicències reials per a predicar a jueus i sarraïns (segles XIII – XIV)', *Calls* 2 (1987), pp. 113-119. See also H.J. Hames, 'A Discourse in the Synagogue: Ramon Llull and his Dialogue with the Jews', *Constantes y fragmentos del pensamiento luliano* (Beihefte zur Iberoromania 12), F. Domínguez and J. de Salas, eds., Tübingen 1996, pp. 99-115.

28 While the consensus of scholarly opinion is that the Barcelona disputation was held for the purpose of converting Jews, there is a good case to be made for this not being the central purpose. See H.J. Hames, 'Truly Seeking Conversion?: The Mendicants, Ramon Llull and Alfonso de Valladolid', *Morgen-Blatz* 20 (2010), pp. 41-61, especially pp. 41-47.

29 Ms. Cambridge University, Add. 1224.2, fol. 23r has: "But it is right to argue with him [the king] at length". However, here it seems that the printed text is correct, as the manuscript continues like the printed text, making no sense of the "But one thing I will say" etc.; this only makes sense if there is a negative in the previous clause.

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saw him and had knowledge of his teachings did not heed him, how are we to believe and accept the words of the king who has no direct knowledge of these teachings except from the traditions he has heard from people who did not know him [Jesus], who were not from his country as were our ancestors who knew him and were witnesses.<sup>30</sup>

While the last part of this response may be an attempt to counter the Augustinian doctrine of *testimonium veritatis*, i.e., the idea that the Jews and Jewish texts bear witness to the truth of Christianity, Nahmanides, while clearly respectful of the king, does not refrain from criticizing him.<sup>31</sup> Though he states at the outset that it is not right to argue with the king, this is just a rhetorical device, for he then goes on to say exactly what he wanted, positing that the king based his claims on hearsay, on traditions that cannot be trusted, whereas the Jews have clear proof that Jesus was not the Messiah from the very fact that the Rabbis who were his contemporaries and who had direct knowledge of his teachings, denied their veracity. This, however, stands in contrast with his response to Ramon de Penyafort, which is much more direct and sarcastic in tone, and does not exhibit any of the respect accorded the king. In his response, Nahmanides mentions a parable that the king must have related in his sermon regarding the Trinity, saying that those who taught the king this parable had misled him. Comparing Nahmanides’ two rejoinders, one gets the impression that he wanted to show his Jewish audience how confident he was of his standing with the king, even in these uncomfortable circumstances, while being much more disparaging of the Dominicans’ arguments.<sup>32</sup>

The next day, Nahmanides had an audience with the king who, in a manner reminiscent of the love shown between Abimelech and Abraham, said to him: “Return to your town to life and to peace”, and Nahmanides adds: “... and he gave me 300 dinars for expenses and I took my leave from him with much love, may God grant him eternal life”.<sup>33</sup> That the king did actually give this sum of money to Nahmanides is supported by a document in the archives of the Crown of Aragon dated 25 February 1265 in which the king acknowledges his debt to a Jewish

30 *Vikuah*, pp. 319-320, para. 103.

31 On Nahmanides and Augustine, see A. Funkenstein, ‘Nahmanides’ Symbolical Reading of History’, *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, J. Dan and E. Talmage, eds., Cambridge, Mass. 1982, pp. 129-150 and S. Pines, ‘Nahmanides’ Comments on Adam in the Garden of Eden’, *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of the Jewish People presented to Professor Haim Beinart on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, A. Mirsky et al., eds., Jerusalem 1988, pp. 159-164 (Hebrew).

32 *Vikuah*, p. 320, para. 105.

33 *Idem*, p. 320, para. 108 with corrections from Ms. Cambridge University Add. 1224.2, fol. 24v. Cf. Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 1, pp. 21-23. The printed edition has “may God grant me eternal life” and does not have “for expenses”.

merchant in Barcelona who forwarded this sum to “the Rabbi from Gerona”.<sup>34</sup> The very cordial manner of the depiction of their leave-taking gains credence in light of what happened in the aftermath of the disputation. At the request of the bishop of Gerona, Nahmanides wrote an account of the disputation, probably in Catalan, which caused consternation amongst the Dominicans. Having approached the king to ask him to punish Nahmanides severely, Ramon de Penyafort, Friar Paul and Arnold of Segerra refused the king’s offer of two years banishment and the burning of the account itself as being insufficient. The king, together with the bishop of Barcelona, a sacristan and two jurists actually upheld Nahmanides’ claim that he had been given permission to speak freely at the disputation, and that he had only written his text at the request of the bishop of Gerona.<sup>35</sup> The Dominicans protested to Pope Clement IV who, probably in early 1267, wrote to Jaime I asking him “to punish the impudence of the man who, according to what he had heard, had written a book full of lies about the disputation held in the presence of the king with Friar Paul of the Dominicans, which he had copied and circulated in order to publicize his false beliefs”.<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether this letter led the king to take any further steps against Nahmanides, though it has been linked with Nahmanides’ departure for the Holy Land in August or September of 1267. In fact, the pope’s letter may have had nothing to do with Nahmanides’ departure from the Crown of Aragon, as he viewed the settlement of the Land of Israel as a positive commandment, and his migration may also have been connected to his messianic beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Thus, to a certain degree, the archival evidence supports Nahmanides’ presentation of his standing and relationship with the king in his version of the events of the disputation.

There are other moments during the disputation which again demonstrate Nahmanides’ position vis-à-vis the king. In one place Nahmanides emphatically states that Jaime is “worth more to me than the Messiah himself”, in that “You are a king, and he is a king, you are a gentile king, and he is the king of Israel, for the Messiah is a flesh and blood king like you and you allow me to worship God here in exile”.<sup>38</sup> Another exchange of great interest occurs at the beginning

34 J. Régné, *History of the Jews in Aragon: Regesta and Documents 1213-1327*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 57-58, no. 319. See also Y.T. Assis, *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry: Community and Society in the Crown of Aragon 1213-1327*, London 1997, pp. 50-51, 314.

35 J. Régné, *Ibid.*, p. 58, no. 323.

36 Y. Baer, ‘A Critical Look at the Disputations of Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and Nahmanides’, p. 177 and Baer, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 158-159.

37 Nahmanides suggested in the disputation as well as in his *Sefer ha-Geulah* that the Messiah would come in 1358. See E. Feliu, ‘El comentari sobre el Pentateuc de Mossé ben Nahman’, pp. 196-197. See also N. Caputo, ‘Prophecy and Redemption: Messianic Expectation in Nahmanides’ *Sefer ha-Geulah*’, *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, G. Jaritz and G. Moreno-Riaño, eds., Turnhout 2003, pp. 171-189.

38 *Vikuah*, p. 310, para. 47. See Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, vol. 2, Jerusalem

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of the last public session, which took place in the palace on a Friday following a private session held there the day before with only a few people in attendance. Nahmanides starts by saying that he does not want to continue disputing, and when the king asks him why, he replies that many Christians who were fearful of the Dominicans, along with senior churchmen including a Franciscan and knights of the realm, had told him that it was not wise of him to speak out against the beliefs of the Dominicans. In addition, some senior citizens of Barcelona had spoken with members of the Jewish community, also suggesting that Nahmanides stop the disputation. However, in the presence of the king and seeing that the king’s wish was that the disputation continues, all those who had pressured Nahmanides to desist suddenly got cold feet. Nahmanides then comments that he and the king talked about this matter at some length, with Nahmanides finally agreeing to continue the disputation.<sup>39</sup> However, he asked the king’s permission to be the one asking the questions, since Friar Paul had done so for the previous three days. The king’s response was, “Even so, you should respond to him” and Nahmanides adds, “and I acquiesced”.<sup>40</sup> None of the Christians present, whether noblemen, churchmen or citizens, had dared challenge the will of the king, whereas Nahmanides writes that he did not hesitate to discuss the matter further, not accepting the king’s wishes as being final. He finally acquiesced, but in his mind, it was as an equal, not like the Christians, who acted in the manner of servants of the king carrying out his command. It is interesting to conjecture why the king wanted the disputation to continue, and it is not inconceivable that he actually hoped that the Dominicans would be publically embarrassed. In other words, Jaime I was hoping that Nahmanides would put the Dominicans in their place. This suggestion fits in well with the king’s later defense of Nahmanides, as well as with his ambivalent attitude towards the Dominican mission in general.<sup>41</sup>

Nahmanides’ invocation of eternal life for the king at the end of his Hebrew version of the disputation should not be dismissed lightly.<sup>42</sup> There was no apparent

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1960, p. 474 commenting on Deut, 28:42 where he suggests that the Crown of Aragon is one of the “better places” to be in exile.

39 Ibid., p. 316, paras 79-82.

40 Ibid., p. 316, para. 83. The printed edition has “*ve-hodeti*” as against the manuscript “*ve-kibalti*”.

41 On the Dominican mission in the Crown of Aragon, see R. Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*, Cambridge 2009 and H.J. Hames, ‘Through Ramon Llull’s Looking Glass: What was the Thirteenth-Century Dominican Mission Really About?’, *Ramon Llull i el lul·lisme: pensament i llenguatge – Homenatge a J.N. Hillgarth i A. Bonner*, M. Ripoll and M. Tortella, eds., Palma 2012, pp. 51-74.

42 The printed version has “And I should be merited by the Lord for life in the world to come” (*Vikuah*, p. 320, para. 108). This makes little sense as in the previous sentence, Nahmanides is talking about his departure from the king, “and I took my leave

reason for him to have inserted this into a text which was unlikely to be read by a Christian, particularly when in other places in the text, he is openly negative about other Christian participants in the disputation. It reflects his perception of the nature of the relationship existing between himself and King Jaime I, which he viewed as one of mutual respect and admiration. It is this self-perceived relationship which allows a more nuanced appreciation of Nahmanides' account of the Barcelona disputation, in that the rhythm, content and structure of the account are a direct function of it. In Nahmanides' portrayal of the events, even though they both hold very different opinions on the question of religious belief, it is he and the king who collaborate, almost as equals, to put the Dominicans and Friar Paul in their place.<sup>43</sup> For reasons that have to do with his relations with the Church authorities, the king had little choice but to hold the disputation, but it seems that he was determined to make it as fair as possible.<sup>44</sup> This is reflected in Nahmanides' account of the events, in how he spoke and answered the king, and in the final resolution of the whole affair.<sup>45</sup>

In a letter written from the Land of Israel to his son Shelomo, who seemingly held a position at the court of Castile, Nahmanides cites from a work attributed to Shelomo ibn Gabirol, *Mivhar Peninim* (Choice of Pearls), where it says: "A king is compared to fire; if you move too far away from it, you need it, but if you get too close, you get burned".<sup>46</sup> And Nahmanides adds: "Always take care to stand in court with a measure of fear and morality".<sup>47</sup> This advice given to his son brings us back full circle to the quotation from the Catalan Mahzor at the start of this article. One should not only fear God, but also the earthly king in whose dominions the Jews who are in exile find themselves. However, fear does not

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from him with great love", followed by the aforementioned phrase. Ms. Cambridge University Add. 1224.2, fol. 24v has "and I took my leave from him with great love and God should merit him [i.e. the king] to have life in the world to come".

- 43 At the end of the disputation, the king said to Nahmanides: "Let the disputation stop here (*yishaer ha-vikuah*), for I [the king] have not seen anyone who is in the wrong, who has argued as well as I [Nahmanides] have". *Vikuah*, p. 319, para. 102.
- 44 The king's ambivalent relations with the Church can be seen throughout the chronicle he authored, the *Llibre dels fets* (Book of Deeds). See *The Book of Deeds of James I of Aragon: A Translation of the Medieval Catalan Llibre dels Fets*, tra. D. Smith and H. Buffery, Aldershot 2003. See also the brief comments in J.N. Hillgarth, *The Spanish Kingdoms 1250-1516*, vol. 1, Oxford 1976, pp. 90-94.
- 45 On the good relations between the king, Nahmanides and the Jews in general along with the king's protection of the Jews in light of the disputation, see Y.T. Assis, 'The Jews in the Crown of Aragon and its Dominions', *Moreshet Sefarad: The Sephardi Legacy*, vol. 1, H. Beinart, ed., Jerusalem 1992, pp. 44-102, especially 51-53, 95-96.
- 46 Solomon ibn Gabirol (attributed), *Mivhar ha-Peninim*, Sha'ar ha-Melech [*Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Choice of Pearls*, translated from the Hebrew with introduction and annotations by A. Cohen, New York 1925].
- 47 C.B. Chavel, *The Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. 1, p. 370.

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imply servility, as Nahmanides’ depiction of the Barcelona disputation shows, and, like Abraham in his dealings with gentile kings, much can be achieved if one behaves ethically. In Nahmanides’ view, Jaime I saw him almost as an equal, unlike the Dominicans, and this goes a long way to explaining why, in the Hebrew version, the disputation in 1263 ended as it did.

