

1263: Nachmanides on the Disputation of Barcelona in his *Sefer Vikuah*

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Abstract: Nachmanides's *Sefer Vikuah* records the so-called Barcelona Disputation of 1263, one of three famous debates between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages. In these staged debates, Christian and Jewish participants publicly disputed interpretations of the Bible and extra-Biblical Jewish texts, such as the Talmud. These debates provide an insight into Jewish-Christian relations in an age of Christian expansionism and important social transformations. They illustrate how increasingly rampant forms of aggressive Christian proselytism contributed to the wider decline of these relations in late medieval Europe.

Source

Selected passages from *Sefer Vikuah*, ed. Moritz Steinschneider, *Nachmanidis disputatio publica pro fide Judaica (a. 1263) e Codd. MSS. recognita addita ejusdem expositione in Jesaiam LIII*, Berlin: Vendunt A. Asher & Co / Stettin: E. Schrentzel, 1860, pp. 27–32. Translation: Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*. London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982, pp. 102–146, here: pp. 103, 105, 110–111, 112–113, 115–116.

וענו כלם ואמרו יפה אמרת, ובכנ הסכמנו לדבר תחלה בענין המשיח אם כבר בא כפי אמונת הנוצרים או אם הוא עתיד לבא כאמונת היהודים, ואחרי כן נדבר אם המשיח הוא האלהי ממש או אם הוא איש גמור נולד מאיש ואשה, ואח"כ נדבר אם היהודים בתורה האמתית או הנוצרים עושים אותה (...).

התחיל ואמר הנה הכתוב אומר [בראשית מ"ט י'] לא יסור שבט מיהודא וגו עד כי יבא שילה, שהוא המשיח, הרי שהנביא אומר כי לעולם יהיה ליהודא כח עד המשיח היוצא ממנו, ואם כן היום שאין לכם לא שבט אחד ולא מחוקק אחד כבר בא המשיח שהוא מזרעו ולו הממשלה (...).

חזר פראי פול וטען כי בתלמוד אמרו שכבר בא המשיח והביא אותה הגדה

[Nachmanides] Thus, we agreed to speak first about the Messiah – whether he has already come as Christians believe or whether he is yet to come as the Jews believe. And after that, we would speak on whether the Messiah was truly divine, or entirely human, born from a man and a woman. And after that we would discuss whether the Jews still possess the true law, or whether the Christians practice it. (...)

He [Friar Paul] began, “Scripture says [Genesis, 49:10], ‘the sceptre shall not depart from Judah (...) until Shiloh come.’ Shiloh is the Messiah, and the prophet says that Judah will always have power until the coming of the Messiah who goes forth from him. And if so, today when you have not a single sceptre or a single ruler, the Messiah who is the seed of Judah and has the right of rulership must have come (...).”

Friar Paul now resumed, and argued that it is stated in the Talmud that the Messiah has already

שבמדרש איכה בהוא גברא דהוי [רדי] וגעת תורת' עבר הד ערבי ואמר לי בר יהודאי בר יהודאי שרי תורתך שרי פדנך שרי קנקנך דאיתחרב בית המקדש שרא תורתיה שרא פדניה שרא קנקניה, געת זמן תנינית אמר ליה אסור תורתך אסור פדנך אסור קנקנך דאיתליד משיחן.

ואען ואומר אני איני מאמין בהגדה זו [כלל] אבל ראיה היא לדברי.

אז זעק אותו האיש ואמר ראו שהוא מכחיש בספרים שלהם.

אמרתי באמת שאיני מאמין שנולד המשיח ביום החרבן וההגדה הזאת או שאינה אמת או שיש לה פירוש אחד מסתרי החכמים, אבל אקבל אותה כפשטה כאשר אמרת כי ראיה היא לי, הנה היא אומרת כי ביום החרבן אחרי שנהרב [הבית] בו בים נולד המשיח, אם כן אין ישו משיח כאשר אמרתם שהוא קודם החרבן נולד ונהרג, ולידתו קרוב למאתים שנה קודם החרבן לפי האמת ולפי חשבונכם ע"ג שנה, אז נשתתק האיש (...).

טען אותו האיש הנה פרשת הנה ישכיל עבדי [ישעי' נ"ב י"ג] מספרת ענין מיתת המשיח ובואו ביד אויביו ונתנו אותו עם הרשעים כאשר היה בישו, אתה מאמין שתדבר אותה פרשה במשיח?

אמרתי לו ואמת היא כי רבותינו ז"ל בספרי ההגדת דורשים אותו על משיח אבל לא אמרו מעולם שיהרג ביד שונאיו, כי לא תמצא לעולם בשום ספר מספרי ישראל לא בתלמוד ולא בהגדות שיהרג משיח בן דוד לעולם, ולא שימסר ביד שונאיו ולא שיקבר בין הרשעים, כי אפילו המשיח שעשיתם לכם לא נקבר, ואני אפרש [לכם] הפרשה אם תרצו

come. He cited the Aggadah in the Midrash of Lamentations [II:57]: "A certain man was ploughing and his cow lowed. An Arab passed by and said to him, 'Jew, Jew, untie your cow, untie your plough, untie your coulter, for the Temple has been destroyed.' He untied his cow, he untied his plough, he untied his coulter. The cow lowed a second time. The Arab said to him, 'Tie up your cow, tie up your plough, tie up your coulter, for your Messiah has been born.'"

I [Nachmanides] replied, "I do not believe in this Aggadah, but in any case, it supports my words."

Then that man [Friar Paul] cried out, "See how he denies the writings of the Jews!"

I [Nachmanides] said: "In truth, I do not believe that the Messiah was born on the day of the Destruction, and this Aggadah is either not true, or it has some other interpretation derived from the secrets of the Sages. Nevertheless, I will accept it in its literal meaning just as you quote it, for it gives support to my argument. See, it says that on the day of the Destruction of the Temple, after the Destruction took place but on the same day, the Messiah was born. If so, Jesus was not the Messiah, as you contend, for he was born and was killed before the Destruction, and his birth was nearly two hundred years before the Destruction in fact, though according to your reckoning, it was seventy-three years before the Destruction." Then the man [Friar Paul] was put to silence. (...)

That man [Friar Paul] then argued, "See, the passage beginning with the words, 'Behold, my servant will prosper (...)' [Isaiah, 52:13] relates the matter of the death of the Messiah, of his subjection, and of his being set among the wicked, just as happened with Jesus. Do you believe that that passage speaks of the Messiah?" (...)

I [Nachmanides] said to him, "It is true that our Teachers, may their memory be for a blessing, in the Aggadic books, interpret the passage allegorically of the Messiah. But they never said that the Messiah would be slain by the hand of his enemies. You will never find in any book of the literature of Israel, either in the Talmud or the Aggadic books, that the Messiah, son of David, would ever be slain, or that he would be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, or that he would be buried among the wicked, for even your Messiah,

בפירוש טוב ומבואר, ואין שם כלל שיהרג כאשר היה במשיחכם, ולא רצו לשמוע (...).

קמתי ואומר שמעו שמעו עמים כלם. פראי פול שאלני אם כבר בא המשיח שדברו בו הנביאים ואמרתי שלש בא, והביא ספר הגדה שאמר בו כי ביום שחרב בהמ"ק בו ביום נולד, ואמרתי אני שאיני מאמין בזה אלא הוא ראה לדברי, ועתה אני אפרש לכם. אמרתי שאיני מאמין בזה, [דעו כי] אנחנו יש לנו שלשה מינין של ספרים האחד הוא הבבלי"ה, וכולנו מאמינים בו אמונה שלנה, והשני הוא הנקרא תלמוד והוא פירוש למצות התורה יש תרי"ג מצות ואין בה אחת שלא נתפרשה בתלמוד, ואנחנו מאמינים בו בפירוש המצות. עוד יש לנו ספר שלישי הנקרא מדרש רוצה לומר שרמוני"ש, כמו שאם יעמוד ההגמון ויעשה שרמון [אחד], ואחד מן השומעין היה טוב בעיניו וכתבון, וזה הספר מי שיאמין בו טוב, ומי שלא יאמין בו לא יזיק, ויש לנו חכמים שכתבו שהמשיח לא יולד עד קרוב לזמן הקץ שיבא להוצינו מן הגלות, על כן איני מאמין בזה הספר במה שאמר שנולד מיום החרבון, ועוד אני קורין אותו הספר הגדה רוצה לומר ראסיונאמינטו, רוצה לומר שאינן אלא דברים שאדם מגיד לחבירו, אבל אני מקבל אותה הגדה כפשוטה כמו שאתם חפצים בה מפני שהיא ראה מפורשת שאין ישר שלכם משיח כאשר אמרתי לכם שהוא לא נולד באותו היום אבל כבר עבר כל עניינו מזמן מרובה (...).

whom you made for yourselves, was not buried among the wicked. If you like, I will give you and excellent and detailed explanation of the passage in Isaiah. There is nothing there about the Messiah's being slain as happened with your Messiah." But they did not want to hear it. (...)

So I [Nachmanides] rose up and said, "Hear, all you peoples" [Micah, 1:2]. Friar Paul asked me whether the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke has come, and I said that he has not come. And he cited an Aggadic book in which it is stated that on the day that the Temple was destroyed, on that very day, the Messiah was born. And I said that I did not believe in this, but that it supported my words nevertheless. Now I shall explain to you why I said that I do not believe in this. Know that we Jews have three kinds of books: the first is the Bible, and we all believe in this with perfect faith; the second is called the Talmud, and it is an explication of the commandments of the Torah, for there are 613 commandments in the Torah, and every single one of them is explicated in the Talmud, and we believe in this explication of the commandments; and we also have a third book which is called the Midrash, which means "Sermons." This is just as if the bishop were to stand up and make a sermon, and one of his hearers liked it so much that he wrote it down. And as for this book, the Midrash, if anyone wants to believe in it, well and good, but if someone does not believe in it, there is no harm. Now certain Sages of ours have written that the Messiah will not be born until near the time of the End, when he will have come to take us out of exile, and for that reason I do not believe in the part of this book that says that he was born on the day of the Destruction. Moreover, we call the Midrash a book of "Aggadah," which means "razionamiento," that is to say, merely things that a man relates to his fellow. Nevertheless, I accept that Aggadah in its literal meaning just as you wish, for it is clear proof that your Jesus was not the Messiah, as I said before, for Jesus was not born on the day of the Destruction. On the contrary, the whole affair of Jesus has passed by a long time before.¹

¹ The source excerpt presents selected passages from *Sefer Vikuah*. I have preserved Steinschneider's paragraphing where appropriate and left the text as he presented it, with vowel markers (*niqqud*). I have added the names of the speakers in brackets to Maccoby's translation to avoid confusion.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Rabbi Moses Ben Nachman (d. 5030/1270), also known as Nachmanides, by the acronym Ramban, and by his Catalan name, Bonastrug ça Porta, was born in Girona and lived most of his life in Catalonia, studying in the *Yeshiva* of Girona and later serving as the Chief Rabbi of Catalonia. Nachmanides was a polymath, writing on traditional subjects of Jewish learning, such as the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, Halakhah and Kabbalah, but also on philosophy and medicine.²

[§2] Among his most prominent works were Nachmanides' individual *novellae* on three of the six sections of the Talmud, *Mo'ed* (Festivals), *Nashim* (Women) and *Nezikin* (Damages), as well as his *Torat ha-Adam* (The Laws of Man), which discusses the laws dealing with death. Perhaps Nachmanides most important work was his Torah Commentary, which favours a literal interpretation of the text, focussing on philology to motivate his use of *Aggadic* traditions. Nachmanides's literal style of interpretation, that mixed traditional Jewish interpretations with new Kabbalistic thought, made Nachmanides the leader of one side of a debate within Jewish intellectualism of the time, against the popular rationalist approaches of Maimonides (d. 4965/1204), which were influenced by sources external to Judaism, such as Greek philosophy.³

[§3] In 1263, Nachmanides, being recognised as the Jewish intellectual leader of the age in the Crown of Aragón, was asked by King James I of Aragón (r. 1213–1276) to participate in a public disputation of theological issues between Judaism and Christianity that would become known as the Disputation of Barcelona. This event placed Nachmanides in debate with a Christian, whose name was Pablo Christiani (d. 1269), but who is also referred to as Friar Paul or Fra Pau. Having studied with Rabbi Jacob Ben Elijah of Venice (fl. 1250s) in Montpellier, Friar Paul had been a highly educated Jew before he converted to Christianity and joined the Dominican Order, sometime in the early 1250s.⁴ The Disputation of Barcelona consisted of four sessions on different days before an audience consisting of King James I, members of his court, and religious leaders. Ramon of Penyafort (d. 1275), influential Dominican confessor to James I, was present and had been key to the organisation of the event. It appears likely that the assembly was much larger, but the only other named characters are the Franciscan friars Peire of Genova (fl. 1260s) and Arnol of Segura (fl. 1260s), as well as the royal judge, Master William (fl. 1260s).

[§4] The excerpts above are taken from *Sefer Vikuah* (The Book of Power/Argumentation), in which Nachmanides himself relates his recollection of the event. Nachmanides was asked to publish his arguments by the Bishop of Girona, Peter of Castellnou (sed. 1254–1279). This version is in Hebrew, which it seems unlikely the Bishop of Girona would have been able to read, leading some scholars to think that this is a translation or a later version, which may or may not have been produced by Nachmanides himself, with the one intended for the bishop probably being written in Catalan or Latin.⁵ Nachmanides's account was published soon after the disputation, angering the Dominicans, who felt that he had inappropriately portrayed himself as the victor. James I does not seem to have been distressed, neither by Nachmanides's performance at the time, nor by his later publication of his account. In fact, Nachmanides recounts that James I gave him a sum of 300 gold coins and attended Shabbat services on the weekend of the event, with the monetary gift being confirmed by a document in James I's chancery.⁶ By 1267, perhaps due to a lack of support from James I, the Dominicans turned to

² Pedaya, Nahmanides, p. 739.

³ Pedaya, Nahmanides, p. 739.

⁴ Chazan, Letter of R. Jacob, p. 59.

⁵ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, pp. 98–99.

⁶ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, p. 146.

Pope Clement IV (sed. 1265– 1268), whose letters to the King secured Nachmanides expulsion from Aragón and Castile.⁷ Nachmanides fled to Jerusalem, from where he wrote letters to his sons about his founding of a synagogue in that city and his accession to the position as Chief Rabbi of Acre before his death in 1270.⁸

Content & Context

[§5] *Sefer Vikuah* recounts the Barcelona Disputation from the perspective of its author and the representative for Judaism, Nachmanides. The long and detailed account covers the four days of the debate, mostly presented as a continuous dialogue between Nachmanides and the Christian debater, Friar Paul. The text starts with Nachmanides explaining the invitation that he had received from King James and then moves swiftly into the first day of the debate. Nachmanides initial remarks show him stating what he wished to discuss and the Christians present giving him permission to speak freely. Then Nachmanides and Friar Paul agree to speak of the Messiah, his nature, and whether he has already come in the form of Jesus Christ, which was to be the main topic of the Disputation of Barcelona. What follows is a substantial exchange of arguments between Nachmanides and Friar Paul about the interpretation of a number of quotations from the Bible, the Talmud, and *Aggadic* collections, that relate to the Messiah. Towards the end of the account, there are some interruptions to the debate, which are caused by the fact that either Nachmanides or Friar Peire wished to end their discussion. At first, Nachmanides agrees to continue, but eventually the account finishes with James I ending the disputation and sending Nachmanides home with a financial reward.⁹

[§6] The excerpts above give some examples of the rhetoric and material used during this debate. The first excerpt shows Nachmanides defining the Messiah as the main topic of the debate. The next two excerpts give examples of how Friar Paul, using Genesis 49:10, as well as an *Aggadic* interpretation from the Midrash on Lamentations (Ekha Rabbah, II:57), argues that the Messiah has already come in the form of Jesus Christ. Nachmanides responds that he “does not believe this Aggadah,” which provokes Friar Paul to say that Nachmanides “does not believe the writings of the Jews.” Nachmanides proceeds to explain Jewish scripture and writings in terms of their authority. He explains that he believes the Hebrew Bible completely, and that the Talmud is a commentary on the 613 laws that are present in the Hebrew Bible. The third genre he mentions is Midrash, which he explains is analogous to the sermons of a bishop and that it is well and good to believe them but that there is no heresy in not believing them. Nachmanides response makes clear that he only regards the Bible and Talmud as authoritative. This is not the case with *Aggadic* material as contained in Midrashic collections, which he considers as the opinions of the Sages rather than as directly divinely inspired.

[§7] Nachmanides’s responses on the authority of *Aggadah* have fascinated scholars of the Disputation, not just for what they might say about Jewish religious and intellectual traditions but for what these responses may have meant in the overall context of the debate. Jeremy Cohen saw Nachmanides’s view here as a contradiction of the views that he must have held as a Kabbalist and an opponent to Maimonidean rationalism, the latter of which held that *Aggadah* indeed did not hold authority.¹⁰ As such Cohen argues that Nachmanides gave this response as he felt backed into a corner by the arguments of Friar Paul. Marvin Fox, in turn, regards the idea that Nachmanides would have held to the authority of *Aggadah* just because of his Kabbalist and anti-Maimonidean stances as an oversimplification that doesn’t engage enough with the rest of Nachmanides’s work, such as his Torah commentary where he frequently

⁷ Hames, *Nachmanides and King Jaime*, p. 16.

⁸ Schechter, *Nachmanides*, pp. 85–87.

⁹ Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, p. 112.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Reflections*, p. 169.

disagrees with the interpretations of other Rabbis.¹¹ By the thirteenth century, there was so much Rabbinic interpretative material available, that a scholar could not quote it all, especially when it is considered that he would be adding his own interpretations as well. Yaakov Taubes develops this point about selection and authority, noting that Nachmanides does indeed disagree with the interpretations of a number of Rabbis but also takes many others very seriously, making any overall conclusion about Nachmanides's stance on the "authority" of *Aggadah* generalised and unhelpful.¹² Taubes further suggests that these statements of Nachmanides are a response to the Dominicans missionizing technique of forcibly exposing Jews to sermons that utilised familiar Biblical and Talmudic material. In his view, Nachmanides provided a means for Jews to reject, not necessarily the material that the Friars used, but their interpretation of it as evidence for their reasoning and an argument for conversion.¹³

[§8] Although Nachmanides's account provides a rare, detailed insight into a Christian–Jewish disputation, we must question its veracity. In the text of the *Vikuah*, he claims to have been given permission to "speak freely" by King James, and his account presents Nachmanides as confidently arguing his points before the King and his court. Scholars remain divided on whether this would have been possible, considering the Christian authorities present. Robert Chazan argues that the text of the *Vikuah* ought to be read from a more literary perspective and that its purpose was to reassure the Jewish community faced with the threat of the Dominican orders' proselytising.¹⁴ Hyam Maccoby takes the view that Nachmanides must have been bold in his argument and that James I must have given him permission to be so. Only this would explain why the Dominicans wrote to the Pope after the event, when they had realised that James I was not willing to punish Nachmanides to the extent that they wished.¹⁵

[§9] Nachmanides's account is not the only one that survives to bear witness to the Barcelona Disputation. There is also a Latin source that records the debate. It is anonymous but bears the seal of the Crown of Aragón, and so may have been written by a court notary.¹⁶ It is also a possibility that it was written by Friar Paul, Nachmanides's opponent in the debate.¹⁷ The content of what was discussed is much the same, down to the Biblical quotations and Nachmanides's comments about authoritative texts. However, the tone is very different, with Nachmanides being presented as very defensive, and the arguments of Friar Paul shown as more convincing. Nachmanides's dialogues with the King, where he appears almost as an equal, are also missing from the Latin text. Harvey J. Hames suggests that Nachmanides modelled his relationship with King James on biblical precedents, and thus supports a literary approach to the *Vikuah*.¹⁸ While it seems fair to assume that the topics, and even the argumentation presented in each account are factual, the personal interplay between the debaters and the audience is much harder to reconstruct.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§10] The Disputation of Barcelona was one of three infamous staged disputations of the medieval period, each pitting a Jewish debater against a Christian debater in matters of religion. The three disputations occurred in Paris in 1240, in Barcelona in 1263, and in Tortosa in 1413–1414. Although there are debates between Christians and Jews recorded as early as Late

¹¹ Fox, *Status of Aggadot*, p. 97.

¹² Taubes, *In Denial*, pp. 682–686.

¹³ Taubes, *In Denial*, pp. 699–701.

¹⁴ Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, pp. 18–27; Caputo, *Barcelona Disputation*, pp. 31–36.

¹⁵ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, p. 59.

¹⁶ Latin text in Baer, *The Disputations*, pp. 185–187. Translation in Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, pp. 147–150;.

¹⁷ Caputo, *Barcelona Disputation*, p. 22. See also, Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, pp. 39–45, 51–53, 57–64; Baer, *The Disputations*, pp. 178, 180–181.

¹⁸ Hames, *Fear God, My Son, and King*, pp. 5–9.

Antiquity, the thirteenth century marks a renewed interest in debating the ‘other.’¹⁹ Although some religious authorities discouraged these debates, the Dominican Order or “Order of Preachers,” newly formed in 1216, grasped the idea of disputation with enthusiasm. As well as taking part in these debates, the Dominican Order conducted forced sermons for Jews, often engaging with Biblical and Talmudic material that would have been familiar to Jewish audiences. The public debates heavily favoured the Christian side, with the role of the Christian debater being played by a Jewish convert in all three major disputations. The Jewish debaters did not have a choice in the topics discussed and had to be careful with their words as their actions at the debate could cause damage to the wider Jewish community. From the Disputation of Paris to those of Barcelona and Tortosa, the Christian rhetoric mutated from an initial denial of the Talmud to the search for an original layer of “truth” that would prove Jesus to be the Messiah. These disputations were the public face of what was a worsening situation for Jews in France and the Iberian Peninsula, as a wave of missionizing led to forced conversions and violence.

[§11] Previous to 1240, these kinds of disputations had been actively discouraged for a number of reasons. The first reason is that Jewish communities could be highly beneficial to rulers of this time, often coming under the direct protection of a king, due to their roles as money lenders, administrators, and leaders of diplomatic and trade missions. Violence against the Jews was also forbidden by the Pope. The bull *Sicut Judaeis* was issued by Calixtus II (sed. 1119–1124) in 1120 to protect Jewish populations against molestation and violence. It was reissued by eighteen other popes between 1120 and 1447, many times as a response to violence against Jews.²⁰ As well as the papal ban against violence and molestation, some Church councils issued bans against disputations, fearing that their clergy, as well as the laity, were not prepared correctly. The Council of Trèves, in 1227, forbid “ignorant clergymen” to dispute with the Jews in the presence of the laity.²¹ Another decree, issued in 1233 at the Council of Tarragona, included the lay people among those who should not enter into debates with Jews.²² Pope Gregory IX (sed. 1227–1241) himself wrote a letter to the bishops of Germany suggesting they prohibit Jews from disputing with the “simple minded” laity.²³ Finally, some Christians held theological concerns aligned with the Millenarianist movement, believing that the Jews needed to remain unconverted in order to fulfil the apocalyptic prophecies of Revelations 7 concerning the Day of Judgement.²⁴

[§12] However, the opposite position, that Jews must be converted to Christianity, was being made popular by missionizing religious organisations of the time, who were very involved in the disputations. In 1236, Pope Gregory IX appointed both the Franciscans and Dominicans as inquisitors, charging them with the investigation of heresy, often involving them in the trials of Jews.²⁵ Since the Dominicans advocated the value of education, they were the first to offer the possibility of studying Hebrew and Arabic to their priests in their main seminaries.²⁶ However, this specific measure only reached a relatively small number of their elite members whereas their realisation that using Jews and Jewish texts to convert was much more effective. The Christian debaters at Barcelona and Tortosa—Pablo Christiani and Jerónimo de Santa Fe (d. 1450), respectively—were both members of the Dominican Order. They were also both Jewish converts who, having enjoyed a Jewish education, were ideally placed to argue against Judaism

¹⁹ Tolan, *Legal Regulations*, pp. 15–16.

²⁰ Simonsohn, *Documents: 492–1404*, nos. 44, 46, 49, pp. 44, 47, 51; Stow, *The Church and the Jews*, p. 212.

²¹ Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum collectio*, vol. 23, p. 33; trans. Grayzel, *The Church*, vol. 1, pp. 318–319.

²² Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum collectio*, vol. 23, p. 329; trans. Grayzel, *The Church*, vol. 1, pp. 324–25.

²³ *Epistolae saeculi XIII e regestis pontificum Romanorum*, ed. Pertz (MGH Epp. saec. XIII, 1–3), vol. 1, p. 414.

²⁴ Randolph, Joachim of Fiore; Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews*, p. 25.

²⁵ Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews*, pp. 85–88.

²⁶ Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, pp. 107–108.

and to educate other how to do the same. In this vein, Jerónimo de Santa Fe published two polemical works against the Jews, *Tractatus Contra Perfidiam Judæorum* and *De Judæis Erroribus ex Talmuth*.²⁷ The Dominicans would use these converts and their knowledge to hold forced sermons. These events involved forcing the Jews of a town to listen to preaching, using the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish sources to argue in favour of conversion to Christianity. Although these sermons were not meant to be violent, as there should be free will in the case of a conversion, Dominican antagonists such as Vincente Ferrer (d. 1419) often attracted mobs that would attack and forcibly convert Jews, killing those who refused.

[§13] The Dominicans' actions were bolstered by theological support, such as that of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), their most revered member, whose writings were hugely influential in Christian society.²⁸ After surveying a range of Aquinas's work, including his *Summa Theologicae*, *De Regimine Iudæorum*, and his biblical commentaries, John Hood suggests that Aquinas and his theology promoted an understanding of "Jews as dangerous infidels, as usurers, [and] as Christ-killers."²⁹ Aquinas took a dualistic view, presenting Jews as the chosen people of God, able to be faithful, while vilifying them as sinful people who were in a constant state of degradation because they knowingly rejecting Christ. Aquinas also spoke out against usury, one of the main forms of employment for the Jewish communities of Europe, insisting that it was immoral in all forms.³⁰ Despite his views, Aquinas was not a devoted missionary in the ways of Christiani and Ferrer. In fact, Aquinas spoke out against forced conversions, both with regard to adults and to the baptism of non-Christian children, believing that the free decision of the person converting was paramount to the conversion being valid.³¹ However, even peaceable statements such as these often had caveats that could be easily exploited to serve inquisitorial purposes, such as the Jews being heretical and a threat to faithful Christians.³² The negative narratives about the Jewish people in Aquinas's work were part of widely diffused negative stereotypes against Jews that were contemporary to these disputations.

[§14] The theology and education of converts participating in the Franciscans' and Dominicans' missionary efforts would inform the rhetoric of the disputations, which began as an attempt to entirely discredit the Talmud. Nicolas Donin (d. 1242), the Christian debater at the Disputation of Paris, instigated the disputation by presenting Pope Gregory IX with thirty-eight articles against the Talmud in 1238. This action of Donin's, led to the disputation or "trial of the Talmud," as it is sometimes called. All copies of the Talmud were confiscated in Paris, awaiting the result of the disputation between Donin and Rabbi Yehiel of Paris (d. 1268), a highly regarded *Tosafist*. There are two accounts of this disputation, a short Latin version and a longer Hebrew version.³³ During the disputation, the Talmud was much maligned as an anti-Christian text that had no authority, even within Judaism, being merely a malicious creation of men that intended to supersede the laws of the Hebrew Bible. Rabbi Yehiel defended the Talmud and tried to explain that it was an indispensable part of Judaism that meant "teaching." The Talmud, he underscored, sought to elucidate Biblical Law, not obscure it. Passages of the Talmud in which persons named "Jesus" are mentioned unfavourably also proved problematic, including a story where a "Jesus" argues with his rabbi and another where a "Jesus" is depicted in hell, drowning in excrement. Rabbi Yehiel argued that it was not the Jesus regarded as [the son of] God by the Christians, refuting this claim with the humorous suggestion that "not every Louis

²⁷ Jerónimo, de Santa Fe; *De Judaicis Erroribus Ex Talmuth*.

²⁸ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, p. 62.

²⁹ Hood, *Aquinas*, p. 111.

³⁰ Hood, *Aquinas*, pp. 109–110.

³¹ Weed, *Forced Conversion*, pp. 132–138.

³² Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, p. 48.

³³ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, pp. 153–167.

is a King of France!”³⁴ Unsurprisingly, Rabbi Yehiel’s arguments did not convince the assembled Christian audience and twenty-four cartloads of copies of the Talmud were confiscated and publicly burned in 1242.³⁵

[§15] By the time of the Barcelona Disputation, the Christian rhetoric had developed. Rather than denying the validity of the Talmud, it now sought to prove that there was an original level of truth that the Jews had abrogated and wilfully misinterpreted. Using Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, contained within the Talmud and other *Aggadic* sources, Friar Paul made an effort to show that Jesus was the Messiah the Hebrew Bible speaks of. Christiani quoted the Suffering Servant section of Isaiah (52:13–53:12), often interpreted to refer to the Messiah, as well as a section from midrashic commentary known as *Lamentations Rabbah* that suggest the Messiah was born on the day the Temple was destroyed. Nachmanides deflected these points, which led to Christiani’s assertion that Nachmanides did not believe his own texts. This, in turn, provoked Nachmanides’s own, now famous statement, that you didn’t have to believe all of the *Aggadah*. Although Nachmanides did provide individual refutations to the passages Christiani quoted, the Latin source reported that his retort against the *Aggadah* showed that he could not refute the evidence of Friar Paul, and that there was indeed proof in these Jewish texts of the coming of Jesus Christ. At the Disputation of Tortosa, Jerónimo de Santa Fe continued this trend in his rhetoric and presented midrashic texts to the rabbis there, including the *Pesiqta Rabbati* and some erroneous translated midrashim from the work of the Dominican friar Raymond Martini (d. 1285). While the rabbis at Tortosa supported the claims of Nachmanides, the Christian side employed the same argument as during the disputation of Barcelona, i. e. that Christ had come, and that the Jews merely denied it because of their sinful ways.

[§16] However, it was not just the actions of religious orders and the Papacy that affected Jewish communities. Monarchs and local leaders were ultimately needed to enforce discrimination against the Jews. The first disputation occurred during the reign of Louis IX of France (r. 1226–1270), the famously pious “monk King.” Louis IX was “profoundly anti-Jewish” and issued policies against the Jews throughout his reign, banning all usury in France, preventing Jews from entering taverns, making them dismiss Christian servants, and enforcing the need for Jews to wear a distinguishing mark.³⁶ This final law, issued during the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, is a good example of religious authorities mandating actions against the Jews that would not be universally enforced by monarchs and municipalities. In 1254, on his return from the Seventh Crusade to Egypt (1248–1254), Louis IX advanced his policy against usury by sending an order expelling from his lands any Jew who did not wish to make his living from “his hands or commerce.”³⁷ The reign of Louis IX was marked by the pursuance and enforcement of anti-Jewish legislation, illustrating the significant impact that an “overly pious” leader like Louis IX could have on the situation for Jews in a particular realm or society.

[§17] The time of the Disputation of Barcelona is often seen as a “Golden Age” for Jews in the Crown of Aragón. However, despite having a much more agreeable leader in James I than their brethren in France had in Louis IX, they were still liable to be used as a political bargaining tool in the king’s relationship with the pope and the religious orders. James I encouraged Jews to settle in his lands, gave them positions of administrative power, and protected their financial interests.³⁸ In spite of these benefits, the king held tight control over “his” Jews. They could appeal to no other jurisdiction and, since they were of such financial benefit to the Crown, were

³⁴ Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, p. 26.

³⁵ Jordan, *French Monarchy and the Jews*, p. 139.

³⁶ Jordan, *French Monarchy and the Jews*, pp. 137, 131–136.

³⁷ Jordan, *French Monarchy and the Jews*, p. 148.

³⁸ Assis, *Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry*, pp. 10–16.

forbidden from emigrating.³⁹ However, King James I was not unaffected by church pressure and that of his personal confessor, Dominican Ramon de Penyaforte. As such, the disputation went forward, as did an order calling for the expurgation of the Talmud and the forced sermons of the Dominicans. Yom Tov Assis argues that James I remained a friend to the Jews, issuing legislation to protect them in the years following the disputation, after the pressure from the pope and the Dominicans had calmed down.⁴⁰ However, rather than being genuinely sympathetic, James I's actions appear to have been opportunistic and politically motivated.

[§18] Discrimination against the Jews can also be said to have served a political purpose at the later disputation in Tortosa. Antipope Benedict XIII (sed. 1394–1423) was in a precarious position by 1413 and needed to reaffirm support for his cause against the popes in Rome. In putting on the disputation of Tortosa, Benedict created a lavish event that lasted months, involved thousands of people, and aligned with the interests of the powerful inquisition and the religious orders. Bénédicte Sère argues that the purpose of this was to distract from his wider political issues as antipope and re-cement his foothold in his native Aragón, the only place where he remained recognised as the legitimate pope.⁴¹

[§19] The public disputations staged in France and Spain between the mid-thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries show a worsening of the relations between Christians and Jews in Western Europe. A change in theological attitudes and the growth of religious orders, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, led to an aggressive policy of preaching that pursued the goal of converting the Jewish communities. The religious orders, although technically beholden to the popes, wielded significant political influence of their own through their extensive networks and personal relationships with monarchs. The combination of theological ideas and political power, along with other factors, such as a developing Christian middle-class that could fulfil many of the jobs Jews used to do in royal service, and an emboldening of spirit gained in an era of Christian expansionism, removed barriers that had previously protected the Jews. Violent events and expulsions became more frequent, with expulsions issued in France in 1254, 1306, 1321, and 1394, where kings realised that they could make money, not from keeping their Jews safe, but through a process of expelling them and readmitting them, for a price. In a response to the violence, expulsions, and ransom demands, many French and German Jews migrated to Poland, where more tolerant rulers, such as Casimir III (r. 1333–1370), held power. The Iberian Peninsula would not expel its Jews until 1492. However, the situation worsened throughout the period up to 1492, with pogroms and forced conversions in 1391 in Aragón, Valencia, and Mallorca, leading many Jews to flee to Muslim-majority North Africa.

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³⁹ Assis, *Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁰ Assis, *Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry*, pp. 27–28.

⁴¹ I am grateful to Bénédicte Sère for communicating this thought in her paper given at the International Medieval Congress, held at Leeds University, July 2024.

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