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The Encounter Between Christian Authority and Jewish Authority over Scriptural Truth: The Barcelona Disputation 1263

The 1263 disputation between the great Catalanian rabbi, Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides, or Ramban, 1194–1270), and a converted Jew, Paul Christian, OP (c. 1210–1275), in Barcelona at the court of King James I of Aragon (r. 1213–1276), has been the subject of much scholarly attention¹. The stature of Nahmanides, the involvement of King James, and the apparently innovative argumentation on both sides have all contributed to a sense of the event as uniquely important in the history of medieval Christian-Jewish encounter. The episode has been framed and reframed in light of broader trends in thinking about medieval Christian-Jewish relations, and no doubt the disputation will continue to play such a role². While the historiography invariably addresses aspects of competing biblical interpretation and the use and valuation of rabbinic *aggadah* (non-legal narrative traditions) in the encounter, little has been written specifically about the participants' assumptions about authority and truth in the contested texts. An examination of

¹ The historiography dates back to the nineteenth century, beginning with *Heinrich Graetz*, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart: aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet*, Bd. 7 (Leipzig 1863). Heinrich Denifle took issue with Graetz's unflattering reading of Friar Paul Christian's performance in the event, and published a combative response: *Heinrich Denifle*, *Quellen zur Disputation Pablos Christiani mit Mose Nachmani zu Barcelona 1263*, in: *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 8 (1887) 225–244. Denifle's work provoked its own response in *Isidore Loeb*, *La Controverse de 1263 à Barcelone entre Paulus Christiani et Moïse ben Nahman*, in: *REJ* 15 (1887) 1–18. Subsequent historiography is vast. Important recent treatments include *Jeremy Cohen*, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, New York 1982), *Hyam Maccoby*, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (London 1982), *Robert Chazan*, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response* (Berkeley 1989), *Chazan*, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley 1992), *Nina Caputo*, *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, Messianism* (Notre Dame, IN 2007), and *Robin Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Cambridge 2009).

² For example, the Barcelona disputation played a pivotal role in *J. Cohen*, *The Friars and The Jews* and in *Chazan*, *Daggers of Faith*, and it plays an equally important role in the dominant understanding of the Dominican order as fundamentally concerned with mission to non-Christians.

the disputation in terms of Jewish and Christian perspectives on authority and scriptural truth finds two different sorts of authority being contested: the authority of post-biblical scripture as arbiter of biblical truth and the authority of Jews and Christians to interpret whatever truth may be present in the text. Much has been made of Paul's innovative use of aggadic authorities in support of Christian teaching and Nahmanides' explicit rejection of those authorities. Scholars have tried to explain away Nahmanides' position and to reconcile it with his defense of *aggadah* in the debates over rationalism that were so important in the thirteenth century. Some have conceded that Nahmanides' rejection of select aggadic traditions was not actually at odds with his approach to *aggadah* elsewhere in his writing, but still presume that for a Christian like Paul, the rejection of any passage from an authoritative text would have been unthinkable. In fact, it should not have been problematic for either a Jewish or a Christian participant to deny the "truth" of *aggadah* in the way Nahmanides did here³. Biblical exegesis in the late thirteenth century was far too sophisticated in both Jewish and Christian circles for any particular interpretation to hold the sort of authority often presumed in the literature. The truth value of any given text depended upon the authority of the interpreter or interpretive strategy; neither Jew nor Christian would have presumed that a textual authority could speak truth without interpretive mediation. In the Barcelona disputation, Nahmanides tried to negate Paul's authority to interpret by claiming that the interpretation of aggadic material in the Talmud was impossible without thorough grounding in the legal conversation surrounding the midrashic material and access to the secret wisdom of the sages, while Paul tried to negate Nahmanides' authority by challenging medieval rabbinic authority categorically. The Jewish rabbi and the Christian friar attempted to strip each other of the authority to interpret ambiguous text; the disputation hinged less upon the question of truth inherent in authoritative text and more upon the authoritative reading of the text.

Our knowledge of the disputation comes from two separate accounts, a brief Latin report, extant in two manuscripts, one from Barcelona and another from

³ Until recently, most scholars presumed that Nahmanides' response was an insincere expedient under adverse conditions. They cite Nahmanides' defense of *aggadah* in the Maimonidean controversy as proof that he could not have meant what he said. See, for example, Cecil Roth, *The Disputation at Barcelona* (1263), in: HTR 43 (1950) 117–144 and Martin Cohen, *Reflections on the Text and Context of the Disputation of Barcelona*, in: HUCA 35 (1964) 157–192. Jeremy Cohen gives a more nuanced presentation but still suggests that Nahmanides' stance was forced and necessarily problematic: Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* 111–122. More recently, a consensus is emerging that Nahmanides' position on *aggadah* is consistent with his approach in his biblical commentary and elsewhere; see especially Bernard Septimus, *Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition*, in: Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity, ed. Isidore Twersky (Cambridge, MA 1983) 11–34; Marvin Fox, *Nahmanides on the Status of Aggadat: Perspectives on the Disputation at Barcelona, 1263*, in: JJS 40 (1989) 95–109; Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*. For a helpful discussion of the historiography on the problem, see Caputo, *Nahmanides* 95–107.

Girona, and a much more detailed Hebrew report, extant in multiple manuscript copies, most dating from the fifteenth century or later⁴. Troubled by disparities between the Hebrew and Latin accounts, scholars have long debated the authorship and veracity of both texts, but the most compelling evidence suggests that the brief Latin account was composed by Paul himself as a summary report for King James while the Hebrew text was composed by Nahmanides sometime after the events of 1263 as an intentionally dramatic refashioning in order to clarify his positions on various matters of concern to the Jewish community. Early scholars saw the disparity between the texts as something to resolve in terms of outcome: did Nahmanides trounce Paul during the disputation, as his account suggests, or was it the other way around, as Paul says? It seems clear now that disparities between the Latin and Hebrew accounts are best explained not only by the difference between Christian and Jewish perspective, but also by the rhetorical aims of the authors, understood here to be the participants themselves. Neither account was meant to be a modern day report of events exactly as they unfolded. Both reports edit the dialogue and move arguments around to highlight a point or consolidate a position. And both reports have a reading audience clearly in mind as they relate the unfolding of the disputation⁵.

Over the course of four days in July of 1263, King James presided over the formal disputation between Paul and Nahmanides. Also present at court were an array of the king's religious and political advisors, bishops, Christian nobles, Franciscan and Dominican friars, as well as representatives of the Jewish community. The disputation was apparently arranged by Raymond Peñafort, OP, the most vocal advocate of Christian preaching to the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula and southern France⁶. Raymond was convinced that speaking to unbelievers in their own languages and utilizing their own texts in argument extended the like-

⁴ An edition of the Barcelona version of the Latin account may be found in *Denifle*, *Quellen zur Disputation* 231–234. The Girona version of the Latin account was published by *Yitzhak Baer* in *The Disputations of R. Yehiel of Paris and Nahmanides* [Hebrew], in: *Tarbiz* 2 (1930–31) 185–187. An accessible edition of the Hebrew account may be found in *Charles Ber Chavel*, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh Ben Nahman* 1 (Jerusalem 1963) 302–320. A critical edition based on new manuscript evidence is currently underway by Ursula Ragacs. For her assessment of the state of extant editions, see *Ursula Ragacs*, *Edieren oder nicht edieren ...? Überlegungen zu einer Neuedition des hebräischen Berichtes über die Disputation von Barcelona 1263*, in: *Judaica* 62 (2006) 157–170 and *Ragacs*, *Edieren oder nicht edieren ...? Überlegungen zu einer Neuedition des hebräischen Berichtes über die Disputation von Barcelona 1263. Teil 2: Die Handschriften*, in: *Judaica* 65 (2009) 239–258. There are multiple English translations of the Hebrew account. Most recent and careful is *Maccoby*, *Judaism on Trial* 102–146. Maccoby also provides a translation of the Latin on 147–150. See also the German translation of the Hebrew text in *Hans Georg von Mutius*, *Die christliche-jüdische Zwangsdisputation zu Barcelona. Nach dem hebräischen Protokoll des Moses Nachmanides* (Frankfurt 1982). See also *Chazan*, *Barcelona and Beyond* 212–213 on editions of the relevant manuscripts.

⁵ See the helpful historiographical discussions in *Caputo*, *Nahmanides* 95–107 and *Chazan*, *Barcelona and Beyond* 39–50.

⁶ *J. Cohen*, *The Friars and the Jews* 122–128.

lihood that some might convert to Christianity, and he labored to set up language schools, to convince secular authorities to compel Jews to hear Christian sermons, and so on. Raymond already knew Paul from his work in Languedoc, and clearly understood his first hand study with Jewish rabbis to make him particularly well suited to take on the disputational role⁷.

We know relatively little about Paul – although probably no less than we know about most other medieval mendicants⁸. He came from Montpellier, where he most likely studied in some capacity with Rabbi Jacob ben Elijah of Venice and Eliezer ben Emmanuel of Tarrascon⁹. He was converted to Christianity as an adult, possibly around the year 1230 and possibly under the mentorship of Raymond Peñaforte, who was active in Montpellier around the time of Paul's conversion. Perhaps, as Jeremy Cohen has suggested, something in the tension surrounding the Maimonidean/rationalist controversy in Provence and Catalonia in the thirteenth century gave rise to Paul's apostasy, but since he remained silent on the matter, we cannot really know. Once converted, as was true for other converts as well, Paul became obsessed with bringing his former coreligionists to share his new way of thinking. From the time of his conversion, Paul attached himself to the Dominican order, and he seems to have forged an early alliance with Raymond, engaged in preaching to and disputing with the Jews in the south of France and in the Iberian Peninsula¹⁰.

While we can reconstruct only fragments of Paul's life, we know a great deal about Nahmanides' life and thought¹¹. He was a renowned scholar, biblical exegete, and kabbalist, widely respected in Catalonia and beyond. Nahmanides famously pursued a middle ground in the Maimonidean debate, reluctant to dismiss the work of the rationalists while insisting on the value of rabbinic tradition against the dismissiveness of extremists in the Maimonidean camp. In spite of language in the Latin record that suggests Nahmanides willingly chose to participate in the debate, it seems he could hardly have chosen otherwise. Whether he was selected for this role by the king or by the Dominicans or by the consensus of the Jews themselves is unclear, but given his reputation and his array of interests, he was perhaps the most obvious choice for the task¹². Nahmanides was asked to

⁷ J. Cohen, *The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate*: Peter Alfonsi, Hermann of Cologne, and Pablo Christiani, in: *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. Todd Endelman and Jeffrey Gurock (New York 1987) 20–47, here 36; Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 142–144.

⁸ Paul's biography has been recently summarized in *Lena Roos*, *Paul Christian: a Jewish Dominican preaching for the Jews*, in: *Studia Theologica* 57 (2003) 49–60.

⁹ Chazan, *The Letter of R. Jacob bar Elijah to Friar Paul*, in: *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume 2*, ed. Barry Walfish (Haifa 1993) 51–63 and *Chazan, Barcelona and Beyond* 24–27.

¹⁰ J. Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* 108–128; J. Cohen, *The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate*. See also *Roos*, *Paul Christian*.

¹¹ Two important recent studies that attempt to place Nahmanides in broader historical context include *Moshe Halbertal*, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem 2006) and *Caputo*, *Nahmanides*.

¹² Chazan understands the language of the Latin report to indicate that Nahmanides was

produce a summary of the disputation for the bishop of Girona; the document he produced – probably the foundation for the Hebrew report we now have – led to a charge of blasphemy leveled against him by the Dominican friars in 1265. He was eventually given a sentence of two years' exile, but he never returned to Girona; in 1267 he emigrated to the Holy Land, where he died three years later¹³.

King James, for his part, was on good terms with the Jewish community before and after the disputation. Unlike King Louis IX of France and his mother Blanche, who brought the Talmud to trial in Paris in 1240, James was not known for harsh language or policies against the Jews¹⁴. Like most Iberian rulers, he had close ties with Dominican friars, and his involvement in the disputation reflects his relationship with the order¹⁵. Overseeing the disputation may have served James politically in a number of different ways, but he seems to have done so without much anti-Jewish animus or drive for a particular outcome. Throughout the disputation he was respectful toward the Jews, and he even sent Nahmanides home at the end with a substantial monetary gift for his troubles¹⁶. He also protected Nahmanides from the ire of the Dominicans after the event. When Nahmanides was accused of blasphemy by the friars, King James gave him no more than a mild rebuke. The outraged friars went on to seek (and receive) intervention from Pope Clement IV¹⁷.

The Hebrew and Latin accounts agree as to the terms of the debate. According to Paul's report, Paul began the proceedings in the king's court by laying out proposed boundaries for the disputation and asking Nahmanides whether he was willing to respond. Paul has Nahmanides eagerly agree to stay in Barcelona to debate "not just for one day, but for a week, or a month, or even for a year"¹⁸. It seems that this detail was added so that, given the fact that the disputation was cut

selected by the Jews already gathered together in Barcelona, but I do not find the argument convincing. *Chazan*, *Barcelona and Beyond* 65–68.

¹³ For Nahmanides' troubles after the disputation, see *Caputo*, *Nahmanides* 65–67 and 93–95 and *Chazan*, *Barcelona and Beyond* 92–99. The extent to which Nahmanides' brush with the friars may have been responsible for his decision to leave Iberia and move to the Holy Land in 1267 remains unknown.

¹⁴ *Daban*, *Le brûlement du Talmud à Paris: 1242–1244* (Paris 1999); *I. Loeb*, *La Controverse sur le Talmud sous St. Louis*, in: *REJ* 1–3 (1880) 247–261, 248–270, 39–57; *J. E. Rembaum*, *The Talmud and the Popes: Reflections on the Talmud Trials of the 1240s*, in: *Viator* 13 (1982) 203–223; *Judah Rosenthal*, *The Talmud on Trial: The Disputation at Paris in the Year 1240*, in: *JQR* 47 (1956–57) 58–76, 145–169; *Saadia Eisenberg*, *Reading Medieval Religious Disputation: The 1240 "Debate" Between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and Friar Nicholas Donin* (Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan 2008), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/60741>.

¹⁵ *Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 82–85.

¹⁶ *Chavel*, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:320; *Caputo*, *Nahmanides* 172–173; *Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 146–149.

¹⁷ Guy Foulques, Archbishop of Narbonne, was elected pope in 1265, taking the name Clement IV. As archbishop, Guy had actively supported Paul Christian in his preaching against the Jews in Montpellier and the surrounding area. The pope's intervention in Aragon represented a continuation and extension of his position in the south of France. *Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 175–178.

¹⁸ *Baer*, *The Disputations* 185.

short without ever reaching the final item on the agenda, Paul could claim that Nahmanides engaged dishonestly. Nahmanides' report minimizes the agency of Paul and the Dominicans in calling him to the debate and depicts him responding directly to the king's command in agreeing to the disputation. Although he has himself accept the charge before the parameters for discussion are laid out rather than after, as in the Latin account, he agrees with Paul on the proposed topics, all familiar points of contention in Christian-Jewish polemic: 1) that the messiah promised to the Jews has already come, 2) that the messiah must be both God and man, 3) that he suffered and died for the salvation of humanity, and 4) that the law and ritual obligations ceased with the messiah's arrival¹⁹. There was nothing particularly new or innovative about any of these questions. Indeed, Paul's argument – and therefore Nahmanides defense – utilized traditional prooftexts, including Genesis 49:10 on the scepter of Judah, Isaiah 52:13 on the suffering servant, Daniel 9:24 on the 70 weeks of years decreed as Israel's punishment, and so on.

While the prooftexts under discussion were old and well worn, there were two important innovations in the disputation. First, it represented a late thirteenth-century movement to transform the literary genre of disputation into a formal two-party engagement. Twelfth-century disputational literature – Gilbert Crispin's "Dialogue with a Jew", Peter Alfonsi's "Dialogue" with his former self, Moses, Yehuda Halevi's "Book of the Kuzari" – all imagined conversations with the other²⁰. Here we have Christian friars working with a secular ruler to bring a living Jew into the room to answer the challenge put to him by established literary tradition. Second, it represents the debut – or at least the near debut – of a new form of Christian anti-Jewish polemic in which rabbinic interpretations of contested biblical texts were introduced in support of Christian teachings. Rather than attacking rabbinic Judaism for blasphemy or the absurdity of its teachings, something Peter Alfonsi, Nicholas Donin, and Théobald de Sezanne, OP all did,

¹⁹ Baer, *The Disputations* 185. In the Hebrew account, Nahmanides names only three proposed topics for discussion: whether the messiah has come or will come in the future, whether the messiah is divine or fully human, and whether the law that the Jews possess is still valid. The fourth topic, that the messiah suffered and died for humanity, is, however, explicitly present in his report of the disputation. Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:303.

²⁰ On medieval Christian-Jewish polemic, see A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Iudeos: A Bird's Eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge 1935); Bernard Blumenkranz, *Anti-Jewish Polemics and Legislation in the Middle Ages: Literary Fiction or Reality?*, in: *JJS* 15 (1964) 125–140; Amos Funkenstein, *Changes in the Patterns of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic in the Twelfth Century* [Hebrew], in: *Zion* 33 (1968) 125–144; Funkenstein, *Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages*, in: *Viator* 2 (1971) 373–382; David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia 1979); Gilbert Dahan, *La Polémique chrétienne contre le judaïsme au Moyen Age* (Paris 1991); Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute: Disputational Literature and the Rise of Anti-Judaism in the West (c.1000–1150)* (Variorum Collected Studies Series CS 621, Aldershot 1998). For a new perspective on the 1240 encounter between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and the converted Jew Nicholas Donin, see Eisenberg, *Reading Medieval Religious Disputation*.

Paul drew from Talmudic and midrashic traditions to support Christian readings of the Bible²¹. It seems that Paul had utilized this approach while preaching in Montpellier prior to the Barcelona disputation. Paul's report also claims that he had employed the technique successfully in a discussion of the Trinity with Nahmanides back in Girona, suggesting that Nahmanides was forced by Paul's command of rabbinic authorities to concede Christian truths. According to the Latin report, Paul tried to get Nahmanides to admit as much in the king's court, but the rabbi maintained silence, which Paul then was left to argue represented a tacit concession (and further evidence of Nahmanides' stubborn resistance to the truth of Christian faith)²². Nahmanides, of course, had a different view of Paul's efforts. Before engaging in the disputation proper, he responded to Paul's claim that he would prove Christian doctrine by means of rabbinic text by expressing incredulity, saying that he had been hearing about this strategy since Paul began preaching in Provence and that it was absurd to assume that the rabbis of the Talmud would have held to Jewish beliefs if they thought that the messiah had already come, as Christians believe²³. However unconvincing Nahmanides viewed the approach, the deployment of Talmudic authority was Paul's central tactic, and Nahmanides was forced to wrestle for control of the text in a very prominent public venue.

The Latin account, being highly abridged, gives only a general sense of the flow of conversation and the use of rabbinic tradition in the disputation. Paul describes himself as "proving" various Christian positions by means of "many authorities". Typically, Paul describes Nahmanides as "remaining silent" or being "unable to respond" to Paul's arguments, which he takes to be an admission of Christian truth. Paul claims that he was able to get Nahmanides to agree that if a messiah had in fact come, that messiah would have been Jesus, after which, he claims "it was proved manifestly to him by authorities from the Law, the Prophets, and also the Talmud that Christ had in truth already come, as the Christians believe and preach"²⁴. According to Paul, Nahmanides was unable to respond to his proofs; he was forced to concede by the authorities and proofs Paul introduced that the messiah, or Christ, had come a thousand years earlier, had been born in Bethlehem, and had appeared in Rome²⁵.

²¹ On the role of Dominican Friars in the effort to reach Jews by means of their own texts, see *J. Cohen*, *The Friars and the Jews*, *Chazan*, *Daggers of Faith*, and *Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 133–170.

²² *Baer*, *The Disputations* 185. The Hebrew report places this conversation at the end of the disputation rather than the beginning, and the language of the Latin report suggests that it is, in fact, being related out of place. We can presume that Paul did this to strengthen his claims that rabbinic text can effectively prove Christian truth. *Chavel*, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:320.

²³ *Chavel*, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:304. On Paul's disputational activity in Languedoc, see *Vose*, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 142–144.

²⁴ *Baer*, *The Disputations* 186.

²⁵ *Baer*, *The Disputations* 186. Nahmanides' own account confirms that Paul introduced aggadic proofs for these points and elaborates on the conversation.

Taking Nahmanides' acknowledgment that traditions testifying to the birth of the messiah existed in authoritative text as a concession, Paul next asked Nahmanides where this messiah now was, to which Nahmanides first replied that he did not know and then tentatively offered the tradition that the messiah was residing in the earthly paradise with Elijah. According to Paul, Nahmanides tried to make the point that even if it was true that the messiah had been born years earlier, he had not truly arrived in the sense of taking on the leadership of the Jewish people²⁶. Paul argued against this point on the authority of the Talmud which, he claimed, "manifestly stated" that the messiah was "present in the world and would come to the Jews if they would but hear his voice"²⁷. Paul introduced Genesis 49, *The scepter will not fall away from Judah until Shiloh* [i.e., the messiah] *comes*, and reported an exchange that closely followed longstanding Christian-Jewish polemic. Having determined that the lapse in rulership in Babylonia was different from the absence of rulership in the present, Paul wrote, "By this it is certain that the messiah has come to them."²⁸ Paul says nothing specific about the disagreement on the status of aggadic text that Nahmanides reports at this point in the debate, but he hints at it when he continually comments upon the authority of rabbinic text. When he invokes "many authorities of the Talmud", he does so with the conviction that these authorities speak undeniable Christian truth to the Jews. He claims at one point that his rabbinic proof was effective because "authority cannot deceive" (*cum autoritas mentiri non possit*)²⁹.

Paul's sense of something having been proved does not require what we would understand as acquiescence on the part of his adversary. The friar notes that Nahmanides was unwilling to admit that his own tradition suggested that the messiah would suffer and die, but that eventually "it was proved to him by many authorities". Not surprisingly, Nahmanides indicates no concession to Paul in the passages where the friar claimed to have demonstrated Christian truth. For example, in the discussion of Genesis 49, Paul says that the permanent suspension of rulership "was proved to [Nahmanides]" but Nahmanides' report suggests a much more complicated discussion, and one in which the rabbi did not concede the point to Paul³⁰. Paul alternately boasts of success in forcing Jewish tradition to serve Christian theology and expresses frustration at Nahmanides' refusal to accept Paul's reading of post-biblical Jewish authorities. Paul complains that Nahmanides was "unwilling to grant the truth unless compelled by authorities" but when confronted with authorities whose Christian meaning could not be explained away, he said that he "did not believe in those authorities" even though they were in "ancient, authoritative books of the Jews"³¹.

²⁶ Baer, *The Disputations* 186; Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:306.

²⁷ Baer, *The Disputations* 186.

²⁸ Baer, *The Disputations* 186.

²⁹ Baer, *The Disputations* 186.

³⁰ Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:304–306.

³¹ Baer, *The Disputations* 187.

Nahmanides' report depicts Paul sputtering with rage over his rejection of specific aggadic traditions as proof, but Nahmanides' rejection of aggadic authority elicits no intense emotion in Paul's own report. Paul does voice displeasure at Nahmanides' resistance to his claims. Paul believed that demonstrating Christian truth by means of authorities accepted by the Jews should have made the point unequivocally, yet his Jewish adversary remained stubbornly unconvinced. He ended his account by complaining that Nahmanides refused to admit the proofs that Paul forced him to acknowledge earlier on. Having once conceded Paul's Christian position, Nahmanides retreated to Jewish unbelief, requiring Paul to begin all over again. "All, or almost all, of those things that had been admitted and that had been proved to him earlier he denied, and then, refuted by authorities, he was compelled to admit them again."³²

Nahmanides' Hebrew account provides far more detail on the texts that Paul introduced and Nahmanides' response to them. Even given the likelihood that Nahmanides expanded on some of his responses in the version of the report we possess, there is no reason to think that he would have altered the particular authorities Paul introduced. According to the Hebrew account, Paul and Nahmanides came to loggerheads over Paul's use of aggadic material very early in the proceedings. The first question in the debate was whether the messiah had already come, as Christians claimed, or whether the messiah would come in the future, as held by the Jews. According to both Hebrew and Latin accounts, after his discussion of Genesis 49, Paul turned to a series of rabbinic texts alluding to the messiah's birth. Not only had the scepter of rulership clearly fallen away from Judah, as Genesis 49 prophesied, but the ancient rabbis knew that their messiah had been born. The first *aggadah* he adduced was a tradition from *Midrash Lamentations* [1:57]. The narrative links the birth of the messiah with the destruction of the temple: "A man was plowing when his ox began to low. An Arab passerby said 'Bar Yehudai, Bar Yehudai, untie your ox, untie your plow, untie your plowshare, for the temple has been destroyed.' The man untied his ox, untied his plow, untied his plowshare. The ox lowed a second time and the Arab said to the man, 'Tie up your ox, tie up your plow, tie up your plowshare, for your messiah has been born.'" Nahmanides' response, according to his own report, was to say that he did not believe the *aggadah*, although, he said, it would support his argument against Paul if he did accept it: since Jesus was born before the destruction of the temple, he could not have been the messiah. Paul supposedly interjected, "See how he denies [the Jews'] own writings!" to which Nahmanides replied, "In truth, I do not believe that the messiah was born on the day of the destruction of the temple, and this *aggadah* is either not true or it has another interpretation from the secrets of the sages."³³ Because it is useful against the Christians, Nahmanides indicated that he would argue as if Paul's interpretation of the passage were true according to the plain sense, even though he did not believe it was. Paul continued this line of ar-

³² Baer, *The Disputations* 187.

³³ Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:306.

gumentation, leaving Nahmanides to distinguish more than once between the literal and mystical senses of various passages, rejecting Paul's reading of the *aggadah* as naïve and uninformed.

Unlike Paul, Nahmanides distinguished one day from another in his report, and after a first day filled with tension between Christian and Jewish participants understanding of aggadic literature, Nahmanides reported that when everyone had reconvened for the second day, he asked and was granted permission to clarify for listeners his position on the aggadic material that Paul was attempting to use as proof. Nahmanides rehearsed the previous day's arguments surrounding the aggadic tradition and repeated his claim that he did not believe in the *aggadah* on the messiah's birth that Paul had invoked. Then he proceeded to explain why that was the case, distinguishing between different sorts of Jewish scripture. The first sort of scripture, he explained, is the Bible, which Jews believe with complete faith. Second is the Talmud, which he described as a commentary on the 613 commandments of Torah. The third type, he wrote, is called *Midrash*, which he translates as "Sermons". He describes *Midrash* as follows: "This is as if a bishop were to stand and give a sermon, with one of the listeners writing it down. And with respect to this writing, if one believes it, good, but if one does not believe it, it does no harm. We have sages who wrote that the messiah will not be born until close to the time for our redemption from exile. Therefore I do not believe in this *midrash* where it says that the messiah was born on the day of the destruction of the temple. We also call this book *Aggadah*, that is, stories, which is to say that these are like things that one person tells to another."³⁴ Nahmanides presents the *midrash* as an authoritative form of scripture, but its authority does not require that every story be accepted as truthful.

Even with advance knowledge that Paul would attempt to use rabbinic texts to demonstrate the truth of Christianity, Nahmanides had limited options in crafting a response. He began by declaring that Paul's learning was insufficient for the task of interpreting rabbinic text, and when he could, he demonstrated that Paul had understood the *aggadah* incorrectly. On more than one occasion, Nahmanides rejected a problematic *aggadah* as "untrue". Much of the early scholarship on the Barcelona disputation focused attention particularly on this aspect of Nahmanides' effort; if Nahmanides claimed that belief in a particular messianic *aggadah* was not binding, that seemed to suggest that the entire aggadic tradition was not binding [i.e.: not necessarily true]. Some scholars viewed the assertion as inconsistent with Nahmanides' actual position and argued that, backed into a corner by Paul's use of *aggadah* to demonstrate the advent of Christ, he was forced to deny the authority of a genre he actually did find authoritative, and that he sustained in the rest of his work³⁵. Furthermore, so this line of thinking goes, Chris-

³⁴ *Chavel*, Kitve Rabenu Mosheh 1:308.

³⁵ See especially *Roth*, *The Disputation*, *M. Cohen*, *Reflections*, and *J. Cohen*, *The Friars and the Jews*.

tian listeners could only see such rejection as an invalidation of the entire medieval Jewish tradition.

Jeremy Cohen suggests that Nahmanides' place in the anti-rationalist anti-Maimonidean debate meant that any attack on *aggadah* was fraught. Cohen speculates that Nahmanides' sermon in Barcelona immediately following a Christian sermon forced on the Jews in the midst of the disputation was meant to undo any damage he might have caused to respect for traditional texts. Lena Roos likewise has argued that the Maimonidean conflict was a central factor in the conversation; in a place where the debate over rationalism within the Jewish community was so strong, any apparent critique of aggadic material may have been more problematic than it would have been for earlier exegetes like Rashi or Ibn Ezra³⁶. Perhaps, but even those individuals who were deeply devoted to the midrashic tradition did not feel bound to every particular interpretation.

Some of the earliest counterpoints to this mistrust of Nahmanides' statement on *aggadah* were expressed by Saul Lieberman, Bernard Septimus, and, most explicitly, Marvin Fox, who wrote in a brief essay on Nahmanides perspective on *aggadah* that there is "overwhelming evidence that there was no special audacity and certainly no heresy in the views expressed by Ramban"³⁷. The relationship between scripture and truth in medieval Jewish thought is complex. Philosophy and mysticism, clearly intertwined influences in biblical exegesis, both complicated the notion of scripture as authoritative arbiter of truth by introducing esotericism into the text. For someone like Maimonides, philosophical speculation was an essential component of biblical hermeneutics, while for someone like Nahmanides, mystical tradition was equally critical³⁸. Neither hermeneutic lent itself particularly well to interfaith dialogue, since special knowledge was required to make sense of biblical passages under discussion.

Nahmanides used the phrase *derekh ha-emet* (way of truth) frequently in his biblical commentary to point toward mystical meanings buried deep within the text³⁹. Elliot Wolfson sees the central element of Nahmanides' hermeneutical stance in his Genesis commentary, where he explained: "And know that in the truest sense scripture speaks of lower matters and alludes to supernal matters."⁴⁰ But more than just reveling in kabbalistic, allegorical meaning, Nahmanides, found the allegorical meaning deeply entwined with the plain meaning. Wolfson argues that the distinctive quality of Nahmanides' interpretive style is his insistence on multiple layers of meaning within the plain sense itself⁴¹. This parallels

³⁶ Roos, Paul Christian.

³⁷ Saul Lieberman, Shkiin: A Few Words on some Jewish Legends, Customs, and Literary Sources Found in Karaite and Christian Works [Hebrew] (Jerusalem 1970); Septimus, Open Rebuke and Concealed Love 17–22; Fox, Nahmanides on the Status of Aggadot 101.

³⁸ See Moshe Halbertal, People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority (Cambridge, MA 1997).

³⁹ On Nahmanides' understanding of "the way of truth", see Elliot Wolfson, By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic, in: AJS Review 14 (1989) 103–178.

⁴⁰ Wolfson, By Way of Truth 110.

⁴¹ Wolfson, By Way of Truth; Septimus, Open Rebuke and Concealed Love 18.

precisely changes in medieval Christian hermeneutics over the course of the thirteenth century as articulated by, although not invented by, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas. Trained by Dominicans, Paul would have been taught also to see theological allusions within the literal sense. Nahmanides and Paul both had an expansive understanding of the plain sense of text, incorporating theologically infused interpretations within the literal sense. Little wonder that their interpretations of common text in the disputation could not be successfully reconciled.

When Nahmanides says that an *aggadah* may only be true according to a mystical interpretation, or when he complains that Paul's ignorance of matters above and below impeded his understanding of an *aggadah*, he demonstrates the same hermeneutical principles we see in his Bible commentary and other writings. Sometimes in the Hebrew report of the disputation, he uses the phrase *derekh ha-emet*, sometimes he simply refers to the wisdom of the sages, but there is no question that Nahmanides believes that the authority of biblical, talmudic, and midrashic texts require very advanced learning to decipher. However central Nahmanides' mystical inclinations may have been, Marvin Fox cautions against doubting his sincerity when he posited that an *aggadah* may simply not be true at all. Some *aggadot* might bear truth according to the plain sense, some might bear truth according to a hidden, mystical sense, but some simply were not true and could be safely rejected. *Aggadot* that held *halakhic* implications necessitated some sort of accommodation, but there was a vast aggadic tradition outside the bounds of *halakhah* that one could, with proper tools at hand, legitimately ignore or reject.

Robert Chazan, who cautiously sides with those who view Nahmanides' approach to aggadic text as not unreasonable, still imagines that it would have been completely untenable for Christians:

While the denial of aggadic texts was surely a difficult step for Rabbi Moses, it was far from an impossible one. For the Christian reporter, however, steeped in his own tradition's attitudes towards *auctoritates* it was an unthinkable blasphemy. Nahmanides himself attributes such passionate recoiling to Friar Paul Christian. After describing his first statement of disbelief in an aggadic text, he depicts the violent reaction of Friar Paul: "Then he cried out and said, 'behold he denies their texts.'" It is quite likely that this is an accurate report; the same shock is reflected in the Latin account of the proceedings. Indeed to the medieval Christian mind, such treatment of *auctoritates* was unthinkable⁴².

There is no reason, however, to find Nahmanides' assertions vis-à-vis textual authority any more outrageous to Christians than they would have been to Jews. Neither Christian nor Jewish constructions of authority required acceptance of every interpretation of authoritative figures, and the traditions of medieval Jewish and Christian exegesis routinely broke with authority, in just the way Nahmanides does here. Paul's response to Nahmanides' rejection of the *aggadah* would seem to have had less to do with his assumptions about textual truth and

⁴² Chazan, The Barcelona "Disputation" of 1263: Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response, in: *Speculum* 52 (1977) 837. See also Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond* 142–157.

authority and more to do with his frustration at the inefficiency of his proofs⁴³. It is hard to imagine that Paul would have been surprised at Nahmanides' response to his argument; he himself must have known the diversity of traditions on the messiah. As Lena Roos notes, "Paul was probably perfectly aware of the fact that the continuation of the *Midrash* offered an alternative interpretation, and that there were several other possible readings to be found in Jewish commentaries. But true to his method, he chose the one which fitted the point he was trying to make and ignored the others."⁴⁴ Paul could hardly have been shocked that Nahmanides rejected a particular messianic teaching since it was clear that there were contradictory teachings within the same authoritative text. The only way to tell the true from the false was to have a proper theological grounding in the first place. Paul's Christian doctrine provided a different grounding for the reading of the *aggadah* than did Nahmanides' Jewish doctrine. If the emphasis on a strict literal sense of Scripture in the twelfth century opened the possibility of communication between Christians and Jews, the return of theologically grounded readings of the literal sense closed those doors⁴⁵.

Christian and Jewish interpreters alike engaged in dialogue with tradition. The great northern French rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, Rashi (d. 1105), was known for his emphasis on the plain sense, but also for his presentation of rabbinic traditions. His project was to re-order these interpretations in narrative sequence, not to reject them utterly. But there are numerous places where he finds the traditional interpretation entirely unsatisfying, and so he may present a well known aggadic interpretation with the warning "this is what the *aggadah* says, but according to its plain meaning the verse should read ..." Rashi's near contemporary from Iberia, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) was far more dismissive of rabbinic *aggadah*, as was Rashi's grandson Samuel ben Meir, Rashbam (1085–1174)⁴⁶.

If *aggadah* was held to have absolute authority then Rashi's project would have been difficult and Rashbam and Ibn Ezra's impossible. But the fact is, their projects were warmly and widely received – with varying degrees of success, yes, but

⁴³ Jeremy Cohen calls Paul's approach to rabbinic tradition "highly literalist" and suggests that his stance at the "radical extreme of the anti-Maimonist camp" was a primary contributor to his apostasy. *J. Cohen*, *The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate* 38–40.

⁴⁴ *Roos*, *Paul Christian* 52–53.

⁴⁵ On the twelfth-century turn to literal exegesis and Christian-Jewish dialogue, see, among others, *Aryeh Grabois*, *The Hebraica Veritas and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth-Century*, in: *Speculum* 50 (1975) 613–614; *Beryl Smalley*, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1983); *Dahan*, *Les intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au Moyen Age. Polémique et relations culturelles entre chrétiens et juifs en occident du XIIe au XIVe siècles* (Paris 1990); *Dahan*, *L'exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval. XIIe–XIVe siècle* (Paris 1999); *Deborah Goodwin*, *Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew: Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden 2006).

⁴⁶ For a helpful essay on the current state of scholarship on medieval Jewish exegesis, see *Jason Kalman*, *Medieval Jewish Biblical Commentaries and the State of Parshanut Studies*, in: *Religion Compass* 2 (2008) 819–843.

certainly not with the outcry with which Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides (1138–1204) and the rationalists were received. Nor, on the Christian side, can one say that the Church Fathers' authority was unimpeachable in every individual instance. Peter Abelard (1079–1142) spoke explicitly of the viability of challenging patristic interpretations, and the embrace of Peter Lombard's (1100–1160) *Sentences* presumed that patristic interpretation was fair game. Frans Van Liere and Mark Zier argue in their recent edition of Andrew of St. Victor's (d. 1175) commentary on the Twelve Prophets that Andrew wrote the commentary at least in part as a correction to Jerome. He systematically read through Jerome wresting interpretations away from him⁴⁷. The entire Scholastic approach to theology depended upon the legitimacy of pitting interpretations against each other. Authority was contextually derived in medieval Christian tradition just as in medieval Jewish tradition. Jerome's opinion might be authoritative in one place, but inferior in another. For neither community, then, would the truth of one particular *aggadah* or another have been considered inviolate. Rejection of one particular teaching did not invalidate the authoritative truth value of the aggadic tradition.

If the status of the text as authoritative was never really in question, the authority to interpret the text clearly was. Both the Latin and the Hebrew accounts provide insight into their author's assumptions about the relationship between authority and truth. Bearing in mind that the reports themselves are rhetorical devices, we can understand the motivation for the choices that Nahmanides and Paul made in preparing their reports. Paul was very clear about his goals in the disputation. The purpose was not to pit two equally plausible theologies against each other, since, as he said, "the certitude of Christian faith was not open to dispute". Rather, the purpose was to "destroy the errors of the Jews" and more than that, to "remove the faith" of Jews who, though unable to respond to his critique themselves, believed that Nahmanides was fully able to do so⁴⁸. The humiliation of Rabbi Moses, a respected visitor to James' court, was, therefore, a core purpose of the debate. That being the case, we should not be surprised to see Nahmanides portrayed as thoroughly ineffectual in Paul's description of events. According to Paul, a proper reading of Jewish text would make the certitude of Christian faith manifest, and Christian knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, and rabbinic tradition was an essential element of proper reading.

Paul tried to justify his maneuver – prioritizing midrashic text over contemporary Jewish interpretations, by denying Nahmanides' right to interpret Scripture. The very first issue that Paul mentions in his account after Nahmanides' agreement to the terms of the debate was the question of the rabbi's authority, complaining that Moses ought not to call himself "magister" since no Jew has rightfully held that title since the time of Jesus. Paul has Nahmanides concede that the

⁴⁷ *Andreas de Sancto Victore*, Andreae de Sancto Victore opera, 8: *Expositio super duodecim prophetas*, ed. *Franciscus A. van Liere* and *Marcus A. Zier* (Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 53G, Turnhout 2007).

⁴⁸ *Baer*, *The Disputations* 185.

title had not been used for 800 years at least, and satisfied with that response, Paul moved on to prove that the messiah had already been born⁴⁹. According to Nahmanides' lengthy account, however, that exchange came not at the beginning of the disputation, but in the context of arguments on Genesis 49 and the cessation of Judah's rulership. In the same conversation about whether Jewish rulership is definitively past, Nahmanides says that Paul challenged Nahmanides' right to call himself master⁵⁰. Nahmanides has him say that even after the Jews no longer had a kingdom, they had authorities. "For Genesis 49 is explained in this way in the Talmud: *The scepter shall not pass from Judah*: these are the exilarchs in Babylonia who rule the people; *Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet*: these are the offspring of Hillel, who teach the Torah publicly. Today, however, you no longer have ordination as in the Talmud. So even that authority has ceased, and there is no one among you who ought to be called 'rabbi'. That they call you 'magister' is incorrect, and you use that title deceitfully."⁵¹ Paul seems to have moved the exchange to the very beginning of the report so as to highlight Nahmanides' (and other rabbis') fraudulent claim to interpretive authority. Whether the argument was made before the disputation proper or in the midst of his argument on Genesis 49, the effect is the same. According to Paul, the earliest rabbis had an authority (through ordination) that contemporary rabbis did not share.

Paul's intention with respect to the disputation is clear: he hoped to demonstrate the bankruptcy of medieval Judaism and to demonstrate Christianity as a reasonable position by turning Jewish traditions into Christian apologetics and humiliating a powerful representative of the rabbinic elite. While the disputation itself would not likely have led to conversions, Paul probably hoped to provide a guide for other Christian preachers to be used in conversionary efforts. But Paul may also have had another agenda at hand. Robin Vose's recent work on the Dominican Order in Iberia questions the extent to which the order was committed to conversion of Jews and Muslims. According to Vose, figures like Raymond Peñaforte, Paul Christian, Raymond Martin, and other advocates of language instruction and preaching to non-Christians were really quite a small minority within the order. If Vose is correct and the missionary wing of the Dominican order in Iberia was a minority voice/interest, then the pressure on Paul to succeed in his endeavor was tremendous. It was not only the demonstration of Christian superiority over Judaism that was at stake, but the very project of converting non-Christians⁵². Whatever Paul's own intentions, Vose argues that the disputation should be seen primarily as an internal performance of Christian faith, not something that was aimed seriously at the Jewish community. "As Thomas Aquinas and his contemporary readers well knew, carefully managed displays of orthodox doctrine triumphant over infidelity also had value for the edification of Chris-

⁴⁹ Baer, *The Disputations* 185.

⁵⁰ Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:304–305.

⁵¹ Chavel, *Kitve Rabenu Mosheh* 1:304.

⁵² Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* 133–155.

tians.”⁵³ Paul would have been trying to create an authority for himself not only in the eyes of the Jews, but also in the eyes of the Christians.

Just as Paul began his part of the conversation by attacking Nahmanides’ authority, so Nahmanides began by attacking Paul’s authority⁵⁴. Very early in the disputation, at the beginning of his discussion of the prophecy in Genesis 49, Paul attempted to prove the loss of leadership among the Jews by reference to a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 5a. Nahmanides quickly dismissed Paul’s argument, explaining that Paul had misunderstood the text because he lacked understanding of *halakhah*, possessing only a smattering of learning in *aggadah*. If Paul had known much of anything about the legal tradition, Nahmanides implies, he would have recognized the significance of the passage. The message is clearly and deftly delivered: Paul was not up to the task of deploying rabbinic text against even a minimally learned Jewish adversary⁵⁵.

In addition to the charge that Paul lacked the legal training to understand rabbinic text, Nahmanides criticized the depth of Paul’s exegetical ability. Responding to Paul’s interpretation of a *midrash* from *Genesis Rabbah* 2:4 as proof for the messiah’s divinity, Nahmanides cautioned, “Woe to him who knows nothing, and thinks that he is wise and learned”. He then went on to explain that Paul had misread the text in front of him. Since Paul did not understand mystical allusions or parallels between the world above and the world below, he “turns upside down the words of the living God”⁵⁶. Nahmanides continued with the correct, mystically informed interpretation. Just as Nahmanides earlier charged that Paul’s lack of advanced training in *halakhah* made him an incompetent interpreter of *aggadah*, here Paul’s lack of understanding of the mystical tradition makes him an incompetent interpreter of *aggadah*. Nahmanides goes on to show that there are other places where Paul has misread the *aggadah*, stating explicitly that he “did this in order to show to them all that Friar Paul did not know how to read the book which he had cited, since he erred in reading the literary style”⁵⁷. Authority was an essential component of the kabbalistic tradition that was developing in the thirteenth-century and of which Nahmanides was an undisputed master. As already indicated, the most distinguishing characteristic of Nahmanides’ biblical exegesis is its kabbalistic framework. Eitan Fishbane writes that “what makes something ‘Kabbalah’ has more to do with the reliability and authority of its transmittive source than with a specific set of dogmatic doctrines. To be sure, there were commonly accepted elements of doctrine that were associated with kabbalah, but when most kabbalists use the term they inevitably allude to a specific method of transmission, one that is entirely predicated on the authority of

⁵³ Vose, Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews 135.

⁵⁴ *Chavel*, Kitve Rabenu Mosheh 1:303.

⁵⁵ *Chavel*, Kitve Rabenu Mosheh 1:305.

⁵⁶ *Chavel*, Kitve Rabenu Mosheh 1:319.

⁵⁷ *Chavel*, Kitve Rabenu Mosheh 1:319.

the real or purported transmitter”⁵⁸. Nahmanides repeatedly claims kabbalistic authority for himself and denies it to Paul. Since Paul stood outside the circle of those who had access to the secret tradition, he simply did not have the authority to draw truth out of authoritative texts.

Nahmanides’ effort to deny Paul exegetical authority takes an interesting turn in the discussion of a prophecy from Daniel 12:11–12: *And from the time the daily sacrifice was abolished and an abomination put in place, is one thousand, two hundred, and ninety days. Happy is he who waits and reaches days of one thousand, three hundred, and thirty-five*. Paul’s Latin account has nothing to say about it, but Nahmanides draws the scene in great detail in order to simultaneously delegitimize Paul’s interpretive authority and to demonstrate proper hermeneutics. According to Nahmanides, Paul tried to argue that the days described in Daniel 12:12 ought to be read simply as days rather than as years (as in 12:11). Nahmanides – who had devoted serious attention to the book of Daniel in his considerable speculation on time and the messiah⁵⁹ – refused to give in to Paul’s reading of the word *yom* as day. According to Nahmanides’ report, Paul shouted out in frustration, “There is no Jew in the world who won’t acknowledge that the Hebrew word *yom* means an actual day! But this one interprets words as he pleases”. Supposedly, the king called for a Jew to be brought in as a witness to the translation, and the first Jew they met on the street was brought to the debate. Asked what the word *yom* meant in Hebrew, the man answered “day”. Nahmanides reportedly said to the king, “My lord the king, this Jew is more fit to be a judge on this matter than is Friar Paul, but not more fit to judge than I”. Nahmanides then went on to discuss the complexities of the use of the plural term ‘*yamim*’ in biblical text: when it ought to be understood in reference to days, when it ought to be understood in reference to years⁶⁰. This would be an extremely odd exchange if we took it at face value, since under no circumstances would Paul or any educated Christian have accepted hermeneutical standards in which an ignorant man was judged most able to discern truth (outside the bounds of ecstatic vision or other miraculous intervention, at least). It is impossible to sort out all of the possible embellishments to Nahmanides’ account here, but perhaps that is not necessary. What is clear in this passage is Nahmanides’ conviction that Paul could not locate the truth within authoritative texts because he had not the capacity to do so. The truth of a scriptural passage or aggadic text could only be drawn out with highly sophisticated hermeneutical tools.

The rhetoric of disputation sometimes necessitated argument that contradicted normative assumptions about hermeneutics and biblical truth. At various points, either party might claim an authority in a particular interpretation that they would not ordinarily find authoritative, or deny the authority of certain interpre-

⁵⁸ Eitan Fishbane, *Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbalah*, in: JAAR 72 (2004) 59–95, here 63.

⁵⁹ See Caputo, Nahmanides 129–157.

⁶⁰ Chavel, Kitve Rabbenu Mosheh 1:314.

tations that they would otherwise find authoritative. In other words, the process of disputation called forth an entirely different set of interpretive strategies and assumptions than exegesis itself – contradiction is inherent to the genre. Nevertheless, the assumption that Nahmanides denied the validity of rabbinic interpretations he really held to be authoritative because his Christian opponent was claiming them as evidence of Christian truth is unconvincing; it is more probable that he was being entirely honest in his comments about the authority of *aggadah*. It seems far more likely that Paul is the one who took a “false” position, claiming authoritative readings of text outside the hermeneutical norms of either Jewish or Christian community. This is not to say that Paul did not believe that the texts he adduced prove the truth of Christianity. Clearly he believed that they did. His decision to abandon the faith of his fathers, after all, depended upon the authenticity of Christian interpretations of scriptural prooftexts. It makes sense that he might look for support for his decision by looking to Jewish tradition for proof of Christian doctrine. But throughout Paul’s career preaching to and disputing with Jews, we see a moral certainty in the truth of Christian doctrine taking precedence over any particular hermeneutical conviction. In good Christian tradition, Paul placed faith before understanding. Paul tried to demonstrate that the truth of Christianity could be proved by authoritative Jewish text, but his truth claims for authoritative text depended upon a pre-existing Christian faith.

The issues at stake in the Barcelona disputation concerning authority and truth had to do with the authority and truth value of the text itself, in the first instance, and then with the process of locating truth in texts accepted as authoritative. It seems implausible to presume that either Nahmanides or Paul Christian believed that the authoritative status of aggadic/Talmudic literature meant that it unequivocally communicated truth. Faith and mystery alike were built into even the plain sense of the text, and therefore one could find truth in the text only with the right framework. The question of ongoing interpretive authority thus weighed heavily in the disputation. Our attention is easily diverted by matters of content and competing readings of text, but it is clear from both Latin and Hebrew accounts that the most interesting maneuvering took place around the question of authoritative interpretation, with both participants working to undercut the reliability of his adversary to uncover truth.

Summary

Over the course of four days in July of 1263, King James I of Aragon (r. 1213–1276) presided over a formal disputation between the great Catalanian rabbi, Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides, or Ramban, 1194–1270), and a converted Jew, Paul Christian, OP (c. 1210–1275). The stature of Nahmanides, the involvement of King James, and the apparently innovative argumentation on both sides have all contributed to a sense of the Barcelona disputation as vitally important in the his-

tory of medieval Christian-Jewish encounter. Particularly striking is Paul's attempt to use rabbinic *aggadot* (narrative traditions) as authoritative proofs of Christianity and Nahmanides' rejection of specific *aggadot* in response. Nahmanides' dismissal of certain texts as either "not true" or true only according to a mystical sense was consistent with both Jewish and Christian hermeneutical norms and his own writings elsewhere. The truth of any given textual authority depended upon the authority of the interpreter or interpretive strategy. A comparison of the extant Hebrew and Latin accounts of the disputation suggests that more critical than the question of textual authority was the question of interpretive authority. Nahmanides tried to negate Paul's authority to interpret by claiming that he lacked the necessary training in *halakhah* (legal tradition) and *kabbalah* (mystical tradition) to do so, while Paul tried to negate Nahmanides' authority by challenging medieval rabbinic authority categorically.