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Writing Process

Editor's note: This work received the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue; it came with a \$200 award.

After analyzing a graphic novel tackling the Barcelona Disputation, I made an outline of the opposing arguments presented concerning the identity and legitimacy of the Abrahamic savior. I followed this with a rough draft, which I revised after a short conference with my professor.

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Rotten in the State of Aragon: The Possible Intrigue Under James I

Timothy Roman

In our small pocket of the modern world, the major religions are stoic, long-standing institutions, commanding universal respect even if not owning one's belief. Yet in their none too distant pasts, these major religions were plagued with constant travails, both by schisms within the faith and attacks from the alternative paths to salvation. Jews and Christians in the thirteenth century in the areas around what is now Spain were especially at odds. King James I of Aragon sought to illuminate their disputes by pitting the respected Jewish scholar, Rabbi Moses Nahmanides, against his own champion for Christ, Franciscan Friar Paul Christiani, in the famous Barcelona Disputation. This meeting of two prominent minds was well chronicled by both sides of the debate, leaving authors Nina Caputo and Liz Clarke plenty of source material for their graphic novel, *Debating Truth*. The work covers the disputation in artistic style, but still represents in detail the arguments made by both Nahmanides and Friar Paul. The two discussed whether or not the messiah had arrived yet on Earth, and secondly if Jesus Christ was worthy of wearing a savior's crown. Their arguments provide valuable, well-reasoned defenses both for and against belief in Christ as opposed to Judaism, as well as a glimpse into the religious turmoil of the times. These masters also display a high understanding of rhetorical reasoning which can serve as a valuable model for any argument. I assert that due to King James' Christian leaning, the debate was designed to be a non-violent challenge to the Jewish faith in his kingdom; it served as a kangaroo court thought up to bolster Christian faith and unite Aragon under the cross, and it was a success.

In the portion of the debate in which Christ's legitimacy as a savior was on trial, Nahmanides was the first to make his point. He began by deflating Christ by asserting that he had not fulfilled the requirements of the Messiah. He quoted psalms claiming that the Messiah would have dominion over Earth, saying that Christ had had no such claim. He also referenced the plight of the Jewish people,

which seemed not to have improved, and the decline of the Roman Empire after it adopted Christianity (*Debating Truth* 30). His reasoning was seemingly that any true savior would have lifted the Jews out of their subjugation, and he seems to question the logic of an empire crumbling after adopting true and righteous practices. Nahmanides uses these claims to make it seem as if Christ did not fulfill the role of a savior in his time or after it. Nahmanides also insisted that Christ had not fulfilled the prophecies of bringing an end to war, in fact as he saw it, Christians were a very warlike people (31). He was even so bold as to say this in a room full of Christians, and worse, Christian soldiers. It is possible that this direct indictment was meant to reveal to the Christians the what Nahmanides saw as the wrongful nature of their persecution of other faiths, maybe even his own of Judaism. Nevertheless, it was a potentially dangerous statement. Nahmanides commanded the floor with his thoughts, even at times drawing criticism from Friar Paul for being too “longwinded.”

Paul, in his intermittent bouts with Nahmanides, chose to question the Jewish scholar directly from Jewish religious sources. Here Paul was drawing on his own unique past, being that he himself had been a Jew. Since he became a Christian convert, it is reasonable to assume that he had found flaws and errors in these works, and likely wished to see Nahmanides trip over the same passages that he himself could no longer believe. For Paul, who had never been a rabbi, it may have been about questioning a high figure in his estranged church and posing problems for him to solve that Paul had found impossible. Friar Paul confronted Nahmanides with one work of evidence to prove that the Messiah need not be a normal man, as the Rabbi supposed. Quoting a section of the great Jewish teacher, Maestri Moses of Egypt, Paul said that the Messiah was prophesied to die, and that his sons would rule after him, but that the passage did not hint in any way at the death of an average man (36).

Nahmanides responded by evading this evidence until he could trap Friar Paul with a different section of the same text. Nahmanides simply replied that Paul’s was a wrongful interpretation of the text, and diverted to another piece of Maimonides’ teachings which said that the Messiah would be born near the time of destruction, and that he would live forever. Friar Paul was then brought Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah and its book of Judges, which he had requested. When he was unable to find the passage he was looking for, Nahmanides took the book and read a prophesy that the Messiah would come from Israel, and build the temple, then gather all of Israel’s banished peoples (37). At this moment, a friar shouted that what Nahmanides read was lies. Here Nahmanides sprung the snare he had constructed, turning on the monk and asking how someone who was moments ago a credible source for the defense of Christ had suddenly become a

liar (37). Nahmanides concluded by stating that Christ had not fulfilled these things, and then read another verse about the enemies and persecutors of Israel, which he interpreted as the Jews and Muslims. (37). To this, apparently, no one responded, and this portion of the debate was ended.

Both men battled with different tactics, Friar Paul by attempting to force Nahmanides to explain what he saw as clear references to Jesus among Jewish authors, and Nahmanides defending himself with his own take on each source, wielding his well-known expertise as his weapon. I believe that it appears from the conduct of both parties as it is portrayed in the graphic novel that Nahmanides spoke more eloquently and remained more composed throughout the debate. Friar Paul was irked and frustrated at every turn by the wise teacher. Remember that Paul was quoted grumbling against Nahmanides for what Paul perceived as overly long speeches. Yet, what Nahmanides gained from his beautiful oration, he may have lost in his inconsistency. Carefully analyzing the tennis style back-and-forth over the source of Moses of Egypt, Nahmanides' argument can be found to be flawed. He insists that the Messiah should be a mortal man, a political liberator. Yet when he refutes Paul, he references a verse which claims that the Messiah will live forever. This I cannot reconcile with the known properties of any mortal man I have encountered. If Nahmanides is saying that Christ is a mortal man, but will also live forever, then he is contradicting himself and being illogical. If Nahmanides were attempting to paint the Messiah as both God and mortal simultaneously, he would actually be aligning himself with the Christian view ascribed to Christ!

It also seemed at times that Nahmanides was being evasive, sometimes hiding behind his reputation. He would willingly reject the interpretations of other Jewish scholars, asserting himself as correct only on the virtue of his own reasoning. For instance, he flatly denies the veritability of Paul's claims about the meaning of Maimonides' writing, and even admits that some Jewish scholars have agreed with Paul's interpretation, but denies his own belief in it. This seems to prove what might be called an arrogant belief in his own powers of reasoning, and a disregard for his academic and religious community's opinion when it doesn't suit him. His skillful speaking covers him well in this regard, but in a discussion such as this, it would seem logical to base all major claims on sources mutually respected in both schools of thought. If Nahmanides seems to show that his agreement with these supposedly sacred texts is only piecemeal, it would seem to lessen the truth of the text as a whole, and therefore also of every part which Nahmanides uses against the friar. Nahmanides could retreat, however, from the average listener by assuming an air of superior knowledge, and his tone towards Friar Paul was sometimes condescending, and at other times belittling.

Nahmanides' own description of Paul's first remarks was once, "Friar Paul opened with meaningless words of no interest" (36). This description may make an astute reader wonder exactly what was said, and if its redaction is significant. Paul's point could have been a driving thorn through Nahmanides' argument, and yet the teacher mentions it as if he were simply not listening, or did not wish to reexamine the point. It seems sloppy to record such an important debate in such a disrespectful tone towards his opponent.

Try as he might have to convince his audience, Nahmanides was not successful. I do not believe that any faiths in that room were changed, and as a tactical move, I believe that it served the King's purpose well. One could argue that all of this was planned, either for political or spiritual reasons, by King James to manufacture an opportunity to defend Christianity and to strengthen its hold in his dominion. This unity would give him a stronger position as ruler and forward the faith he claimed as his own. Because the debate was at best a stalemate, it did nothing to decay the strength of Christendom in that state, but allowed King James a chance to further the cause of the cross. Some possible proof of James' agenda is evident in that not long after the debate, when he printed his own version of the story, Nahmanides found himself banished from the kingdom, effectively eliminated from the battle of faiths in Aragon, or at most a quieted participant. He had faced an uneven deck when he'd begun. He came from far away to defend his faith to a devout and dedicated Christian audience, and was only complimented by King James as an impressive orator, especially because the king expressed his belief that Nahmanides fought without any true points on which to rely.

In essence, it can be reasoned that King James I organized this debate with the knowledge that he could use the opportunity to empower his rule through the defense of Christianity, while simultaneously eliminating some of the influence of non-Christian elements within it. In this he was mostly successful, and this is the importance of the Barcelona Disputation for the modern world. Nahmanides argued well, but could not do well enough to chip away the Christian foundation he came against, therefore allowing him to be declared unsuccessful, and hushed as a voice of his people. As the world continued to change and develop in this period, his "defeat" would gain importance. In the tumultuous West of the time, the land was nowhere near as claimed as it currently is by permanent states with fixed borders. In a period where politics was so unmistakably linked to religion, the victory of one theology over another carried all the weight of a military victory. If not for this outcome of the debate, Aragon may not have continued to push Christian influence in that part of the world. Without this influence, the largely Christian West as we know it may never have come to be. There is no

telling if alternate outcomes would have been in any way better or worse, but writing from a Catholic University, the religion of which was imported here by a Christian, Western world, it is not hard to imagine vast differences in the development of our immediate surroundings and the world at large, if not for this single event in 1263. Truly, our history is what has formed us, and the understanding of that history is what allows us to begin to form ourselves. It opens us up to the reasons of our beliefs, and allows us each an internal opportunity for debating the truth.

Work Cited

Caputo, Nina, and Liz Clarke. *Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation of 1263, A Graphic Novel*. Oxford University Press, 2016.