

# THE BARCELONA DISPUTATION

## *Ramban and Christianity*

*The Sixteenth Street Synagogue – Pesach 2007*

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### **Free Speech?**

2 Our lord the king commanded me to discuss with Fray Pul in his [and his counsellors] presence in his [royal] palace in Barcelona. I replied saying, "I shall do according to the command of my lord the king (only) if you will permit me to speak freely, and for this I desire the permission of the king and the leave of Fray Ramon de Penyafort" and his colleagues who are hem."

3 Fray Ramon (de Penyafort) answered, "[Permission is granted] with the proviso that you do not say anything objectionable [to our faith]."

4 I said to them, I do not wish to enter with you into a discussion about this [entire matter]. However, in the course of the disputation, I must be free to speak [my mind] just as you are free to speak whatever you wish. Of course, I have [sufficient] knowledge of good taste [so that I will] not overstep the bounds thereof, but I must have freedom of speech." They all gave me leave to speak freely.

### **Were the Tenaim Christians?**

7 Fray Pul commenced by asserting that he would prove from our Talmud that the Messiah, whom the prophets foretold, had already come.

8 I retorted, "Before we debate on this [point], I wish that he would teach me and inform, me how it is possible [to-prove his assertion from the Talmud]. I have heard that while Fray [Pul] traveled in Provence and many (other) places, he made a similar statement to many Jews, at which I am very much amazed. He should tell me [now] whether he intends to state that the Sages of the Talmud believed that the Nazarene was the Messiah and that they further believed that he was an actual [mortal] man and a true deity, which is the opinion of the Christians. Indeed, is it not known that the affair of the Nazarene took place in [the era of] the Second Temple and that he was born and killed before the destruction of the Temple? The Sages of the Talmud, such as Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues, lived after the destruction, and those who taught the Mishnash Rabbi [Yehudah Hanasi] and Rabbi Nathan"-lived many years after the destruction. Rav Ashi, who compiled and edited the Talmud, certainly lived about four hundred years after the destruction. If these Sages believed in the uniqueness of the Nazarene [and if they believed] that he is true and his belief and faith are true, then, if they wrote those things from which Fray Pul says that he will prove [his claim] how could they have remained in the Jewish religion and in their former way of life? They were Jews, they remained in the Jewish religion all their lives, and they died as Jews... Why did they not apostatize and turn to the Nazarene's religion as did Fray Pul, who understood from their words that the faith of the Christians is the true religion - far be it - and defected from the Jewish faith?! ... If they [truly] believed in the Nazarene and his religion, why did they not do as Fray Pul, who [apparently] understands their words better than they themselves did?!"

9 Fray Pul replied, "These are long-winded words, [spoken] in order to evade [the issues of] the disputation. Nevertheless, you will listen to what I say."

10 I said to [the king and his counsellors], "To me, this is a clear indication that he Will not be saying things of substance, but I will [submit to] hear them because it's the will Of my lord the king."

### **Had the Messiah Arrived? – The Sceptre of Judah**

11 [Fray Pul] then began, "Behold, Scripture states, The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, etc., until Shiloh cometh. [The Word Shiloh] refers to the Messiah. The prophet [Jacob] is thus saying that Judah will always retain power until the Messiah will come from him. If so, since you have neither one tribe nor a ruler's staff today, the Messiah who is of his descendants and who has the rulership must have already come."

12 I replied, "The purport of the prophet [Jacob] is not to state that the kingdom of Judah will never be devoid of power at any time [until the advent of the Messiah]. Rather, he is saying that [power] will never be removed or depart from him completely. The intent thereof is that as long as kingship continues in Israel, it belongs to Judah. If their kingdom will be [temporarily] discontinued because of sin, [the kingship] will return to [the tribe of] Judah [when it will ultimately be restored]." The proof for my words is that for many years, before the Nazarene, Judah, not Israel had been divested of royalty, and for many years, monarchy ceased both in Israel and in Judah, because in the seventy years during which [the Jews] were exiled to Babylon, there was no royalty whatsoever in either Judah or Israel. During [the era of the Second Temple, there was no king over Judah except for Zerubbabel and his sons, who ruled only a short period of time. The people then remained [without a king] for 380 years during which time the priests of the House of the Hasmoneans and their servants [the Herodians] ruled, until the destruction [of the Second Temple]. Certainly, now, when the people are in exile, (they have no ruler from Judah], for if there is no people [with their own homeland], there is no king."

13 Fray Pul answered, "Although the Jews had no kings during all those times, they nevertheless had men of authority [who were descendants of the House of David]. Thus did they interpret in the Talmud: "The sheivet (sceptre) shall not depart from Judah. This alludes to the Exilarchs in Babylon, who ruled the people with the sheimt (rod). [The verse continues], nor the ruler's staff from between his feet. This alludes to the descendants of Hillel who teach Torah in public [in the Land of Israel].' Today, however, you have no such ordination as it was known in [the era of] the Talmud, and that authority [of the Exilarchs] has ceased. Today, therefore, no one has the right to call himself 'Rabbi.' Their calling you 'Maestro'(Master) is a mistake, and you are using that title falsely."

I will inform you that our Rabbis of blessed memory intended to explain the verse, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, etc.", only with regard to real kingship. However, you do not understand law and statute except for the few homilies with which you have accustomed yourself. What the Sages mentioned [about the Exilarchs in Babylon, etc.], is based on the following consideration: According to strict law, a single judge (in a case) is exempt from paying [for an incorrect decision he tendered) only if he received permission [to dispense justice] from the Nasi (Prince) who is identical with the king, The Rabbis further stated that in the time of the exile, since there are some royal descendants [of the House of David], they who are authorized by the rulers of the nations [to dispense justice] -such as the Exilarchs of Babylon and the Princes of the Land of Israel - have the right to grant to others] permission [to exercise judicial authority) and ordination. This practice continued among the Sages of the Talmud for more than four hundred years after the Nazarene. The opinion of the Sages of the Talmud is not that there

will always be a sceptre or ruler's staff which will always belong to Judah. Rather the prophet promised Judah that Jewish kingship will be his, and he assured him [only] concerning actual kingship. Nevertheless, it ceased for many years as I have mentioned.

15 Fray Pere of Genoa's then answered, "This is true. Scripture states only that [the scepter] shall not cease completely, but there can be a temporary cessation, [which is called] *vagare* in the Latin vernacular."

16 I remarked to the king, "You see, Fray Pere agrees with me."

17 Fray Pere said, "I did not [actually] agree. Seventy years of the Babylonian [exile] is but a brief period of time, and many of the people who returned from Babylon to build the Second Temple remembered the First Temple, as is written in the Book of Ezra. This type of lapse is called cessation or *vagare*, in the vernacular. However, now that [the exile] has endured for a thousand years and more, the removal of the sceptre is obviously complete.

18 I replied, "Now you are changing your mind. [The term] 'removal' applies to a thing which will come back. In the words of the prophet, there is no differentiation between [an interruption of] many years and [one] or [just] a few years. Besides, the times I mentioned, [i.e., the years throughout the entire Second Temple era during which Judah did not possess kingship], constitute a long period. Moreover, our patriarch Jacob of blessed memory did not promise Judah that the sceptre and ruler's staff will be his only over his own tribe. Instead he gave him kingship over all Israel, as it is written. Judah, thee shall thy brethren praise. It is further written, For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came he that is the prince. "Yet, from the death of [King] Solomon, [at which time Jeroboam founded the kingdom of Israel, which consisted of ten of the twelve tribes], Judah's royal rule ceased over these tribes, as it is written, There was none that followed the House of David, but the tribe of Judah only. Thus, it can be clearly concluded that the prophet Jacob] said only that kingship will not be removed completely..."

### **Had the Messiah Arrived? – Aggadic Support**

19 Fray Pul then reverted [to the original topic], arguing that they say in the Talmud that the Messiah had already come. He quoted the homily in the Midrash on Lamentations" concerning a [Jewish] ploughman whose cow lowed while he was ploughing. A passing Arab called to him, "Israelite, Israelite, untie thy cow, untie thy plough, take apart thy ploughshare, for the Temple has been destroyed." So he untied the cow, untied the plough and disassembled the ploughshare. The cow then lowed a second time. The Arab said to him, "Tie thy cow, tie thy plow, tie thy ploughshare, for your Messiah has been born."

20 I responded, "I am not receptive to this homily, but it is a proof to my words."

21 Fray Pul shouted, "See, he [himself] is renouncing their [sacred] books!"

22 I elaborated, "Truly, I do not believe that Messiah was born on the day of the [Temple's] destruction. Either this homily is not true or it has another meaning, [which lies] among the secrets of the Sages. Yet, [even if] I would accept its literal meaning as you have expressed it, then it is a proof for my contention, for this [Midrash] relates that the Messiah was born on the day of the destruction, after that event. If so, the Nazarene could not be the Messiah as you have said, for he was born and was killed before the destruction. According to the truth, his birth took place about two hundred years before the destruction, and according to your reckoning, [it occurred] seventy-three years [before the destruction]." The man was thereupon silenced.

23 Master Guillem, one of the royal judges, commented, "The present discussion is not about the Nazarene, but whether the Messiah had come or not. You have stated that he has not come, but this book of yours says that he did come."

24 I replied to him, "You chose to answer with typical legal deceit. Nevertheless, I will answer you concerning this. The Sages did not say that [the Messiah] had come; they said that he was born [on the day of the destruction]. Moses our teacher did not come [before Pharaoh] on the day he was born, nor was he a redeemer at that time. However, when he came before Pharaoh by command of the Holy One, blessed be He, and said to him, Thus saith the Eternal, the G-d of Israel: Let My people go, etc., then [it could be said that] he had come. Similarly, when the Messiah will come to the Pope and say to him by the command of G-d, 'Let My people go,' [it will be said of him that] he has come. To this day, however, he has not yet come, nor is he the Messiah at all. When King David was born, he was neither king nor the anointed one, but when Samuel anointed him, then he became the anointed one [i.e., the king]. On the day when Elijah [the prophet] will anoint [the true redeemer] as a Messiah by command of G-d, then he will [correctly] be called 'Messiah.' Afterwards, when he will come to the Pope in order to redeem us, then it will be said that the redeemer has come."

29 [Fray Pull reverted [to the original theme] and said that it is explained in the Talmud" that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked Elijah [the prophet], "When will Messiah come?" He answered him, "Ask Messiah himself." He said, "Where is he?" [Elijah] replied, "At the gate of Rome, among the sick." So [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi] went there, and he found him. He asked him, etc. Thus, he had already come, and he is the Nazarene, who rules in Rome.

30 I retorted, "is it not clearly written here that he has not come? Did [the Rabbi] not ask Elijah, 'When will he come?' Similarly, [the Rabbi] asked the Messiah, 'When will the master come?' Thus, he had not yet come although according to the literal meaning of these homilies, he was already born, but I do not believe" in that.

### **Is the Messiah Mortal or Divine?**

47 I said, "My lord king, bear with me [a while]. The essence of our judgment, truth, and statute does not depend upon the Messiah. [For the purpose of fulfilling the commandments of the Torah], you are more beneficial to me than the Messiah. You are king, and he is king. You are a gentile king, and he is a Jewish king, for the Messiah is but a king of flesh and blood like you. When I worship my Creator in your dominion, exited [from my homeland] suffering and under subjugation, the shame of the nations" who taunt me always, my reward is abundant, for I bring a whole-offering to G-d from my physical being. Because of that, I shall increasingly merit life in the World to Come. However, when a king of Israel, [a monarch] of my faith, will rule over all the nations and I will have no choice but to abide by the law of the Jews, my reward will not be as abundant. Nevertheless, the vital conflict and difference between the Jews and the Christians concerns your contention about the principle of G-d, [a suggestion] which is extremely unpalatable to the mind. All of your life, you, our lord king, a Christian son of a Christian father and mother, have heard priests, monks, and preachers speaking of the Nazarene's birth. They have filled your mind and the marrow of your bones with this thing, and it comes to you [now] out of habit. Yet, what you believe- and it is the root of your faith-is not acceptable to the [rational] mind. Nature does not work that way, and the prophets never said so. Furthermore, a miracle cannot disseminate itself in that way, as I shall explain<sup>64</sup> with valid proofs in its place and in its time. The mind of any Jew or any man will not permit him to believe that the Creator of heaven and earth [and all that is therein] would pass through the womb of a Jewish woman, to develop there for seven months, [at which point] an infant was born, [who supposedly is G-d]

and who afterwards grew up and later was turned over into the hands of his enemies, who judged him, condemned him to death, and killed him. You then claim, finally, that he became alive and returned to his former state [of divinity]! You voice your opinion in vain and to no purpose, for this is the root of the controversy between us.

Friar Paul claimed: "Behold the passage in Isaiah, chapter 53, tells of the death of the messiah and how he was to fall into the hands of his enemies and how he was placed alongside the wicked, as happened to Jesus. Do you believe that this section speaks of the messiah?"

I said to him: "In terms of the true meaning of the section, it speaks only of the people of Israel, which the prophets regularly call 'Israel My servant' or 'Jacob My servant.'"

### Anonymous Latin Report

ON JULY 20, 1263, in the presence of the lord king of Aragon and many other barons, prelates, clerics, and knights, in the palace of the lord king at Barcelona, Moses the Jew, called "rabbi," was summoned from Gerona by the lord king, at the request of the Dominicans, and was present there, along with many other Jews who seemed and were reputed among other Jews more learned. Deliberation was undertaken with the lord king and with certain Dominicans and Franciscans who were present, not that the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ -- which because of its certitude cannot be placed in dispute ?? be put in the center of attention with the Jews as uncertain, but that the truth of that faith be made manifest in order to destroy the Jews' errors and to shake the confidence of many Jews. Since they could not defend their errors, these Jews indicated that the said rabbi could sufficiently reply to each and every question which would be placed before them.

Friar Paul proposed to the said rabbi, that, with the aid of God, he would prove from writings shared and accepted by the Jews the following contentions, in order: that the messiah, who is called Christ, whom the Jews anticipate, has surely come already; also that the messiah, as prophesied, should be divine and human; also that he suffered and was killed for the salvation of mankind; also that the laws and ceremonials ceased and should have ceased after the advent of the said messiah. When the said Moses was asked whether he wished to respond to these contentions which have been indicated, he said and affirmed that he would and that, if necessary, he would remain at Barcelona for that purpose not only for a day or a week or a month, but even for a year. When it was proved to him that he should not be called "rabbi," because no Jew should be designated by that title from the time of the Passion of Christ, he conceded at least that this was true for the previous eight hundred years.

Then it was indicated to him, that when Friar Paul had come to Gerona for the purpose of conferring with him on these matters, which pertain to salvation, and had expostulated carefully concerning the Holy Trinity, both about the unity of the divine essence and about the trinity of beings, the beliefs which Christians hold, he had conceded that, if Christians believed in the manner explained to him, he would believe indeed that so it should be held. When this was repeated before the king, he did not contradict. Rather he was silent, and thus by remaining silent he conceded.

Then in the palace of the lord king, the said Jew was asked whether the messiah, who is called Christ has come. He responded with the assertion that he has not come. He added that the messiah and Christ are the same and that, if it could be proved to him that the messiah had come, it could be believed to refer to none other than him, namely Jesus Christ, in whom the Christians believe, since no one else has come who has dared to usurp for himself this title nor has there been anyone else who had been believed to be Christ. It was then proved to him clearly, both through authoritative texts of the law and the prophets as well as through the Talmud, that Christ has truly come, as Christians believe and preach. Since he was unable to respond, vanquished by proper proofs and authoritative texts, he conceded that Christ or the messiah had been born in Bethlehem a thousand years ago and had subsequently appeared in Rome to some. When he was asked where that messiah who he said was born and appeared at Rome might be, he replied that he did not know. Subsequently he said that the messiah lives in a terrestrial paradise with Elijah. He also said

that, although the messiah has been born, he has still not come, since the messiah may be said to have come when he achieves dominion over the Jews and liberates them and when the Jews follow him. Against this response was adduced the authority of the Talmud, which clearly says that the messiah would come to them daily, if they would hear his voice and not harden their heart, as is said in Psalms: "Today if you will listen to his voice."

It was added that the messiah was born among men, that he came among men, and that he could not otherwise be or be understood. To this he was unable to respond. Also among the proofs presented concerning the advent of the messiah was that from Genesis: "The scepter shall not pass from Judah, nor the staff from his descendants." Since therefore he must acknowledge that there is neither scepter nor staff, he acknowledges that the messiah who was to be sent has come. To this he responded that the scepter has not been removed. It is merely temporarily absent, as happened during the time of the Babylonian captivity. It was proved to him that in Babylonia the Jews had exilarchs with jurisdiction, while after the death of Christ they had neither a staff nor a prince nor exilarchs according to the prophecy of Daniel nor a prophet nor any jurisdiction, as is manifestly obvious every day. It is thus certain that the messiah has come. He then said that he would prove that the Jews had the aforesaid exilarchs after Jesus, but he was able to show nothing in these matters. On the contrary he confessed that they have not had the aforesaid exilarchs for the past 850 years. Therefore it is clear that the messiah has come, since an authoritative text cannot lie.

The said Moses claimed that Jesus Christ should not be called the messiah, since the messiah, he said, should not die, as is said in Psalms: "He asked of thee life and thou didst give it him, length of days for ever and ever." Rather he should live eternally, both he and those whom he would liberate. It was therefore asked of him whether chapter 53 of Isaiah -- "Who could have believed what we have heard" -- which according to the Jews begins at the end of chapter 52, where it is said: "Behold my servant shall prosper," speaks of the messiah. Although he consistently claimed that this passage in no way speaks of the messiah, it was proved to him through many authoritative texts in the Talmud which speak of the passion and death of Christ, which they prove through the said chapter, that the aforesaid chapter of Isaiah must be understood as related to Christ, in which the death, passion, burial and resurrection of Christ is obviously contained. Indeed forced by authoritative texts, he confessed that this section must be understood and explained as relating to Christ. From this it is clear that the messiah was to suffer.

Since he did not wish to confess the truth unless forced by authoritative texts, when he was unable to explain these authoritative texts, he said publicly that he did not believe these authoritative texts which were adduced against him -- although found in ancient and authentic books of the Jews -- because they were, he claimed, sermons in which their teachers often lied for the purpose of exhorting the people. As a result he reprovved both the teachers and the scriptures of the Jews. Moreover, all these issues, or almost all, which he confessed or which were proved to him, he first negated; then confuted by authoritative texts and confused, he was forced to assent. Moreover, since he was unable to respond and was often publicly confused and since both Jews and Christians insulted him, he persistently claimed before all that he would in no way respond, since the Jews prohibited him and Christians, namely Friar P. de Janua and certain upstanding men of the city, had sent him messages advising that he in no way respond. Concerning this he was publicly refuted by the said Friar P. and by these upstanding men. Whence it is clear that he tried to escape the disputation by lies. Moreover, although he promised before the king and many others that before a few he would answer concerning his faith and his law, when the said lord was outside the city, he secretly fled and departed. Whence it is clear that he did not dare nor was he able to defend his erroneous belief.

We James, by the grace of God, King of Aragon, Majorca and Valencia, count of Barcelona and Urgell, and lord of Montpellier, confirm and acknowledge that each and every statement and action took place in our presence and in the presence of many others, as contained above in the present letter. In testimony of this we have caused our seal to be appended as a perpetual memorial.