

Project: "Barcelona 1263 and the Medieval Culture of Disputation: Publicity, Location and Performance"

My four weeks in Barcelona were spent examining the Barcelona disputation of 1263 from the vantage point of scholastic disputation and its cultural dissemination across Mediterranean Europe during the thirteenth century. In addition to having access to the original Latin and Hebrew accounts of the disputation, and the considerable body of historical literature that surrounds these texts, I was also able to supplement my rereading of these texts with unpublished and archival material here in Barcelona (including the recent archaeological reports of the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina) in order to propose a more culturally situated understanding of the location, performance, and “public” attendance of this famous Jewish-Christian encounter.

At best guess the disputation of Barcelona was conducted between Friday, July 20, and Friday, July 27, 1263. As with the earlier Paris disputation of 1240 and the later Tortosa disputation of 1413, both the Latin and Hebrew accounts of the sessions survive, allowing for some relatively sophisticated judgments to be made concerning how the event unfolded, and what in fact was said. The Latin account is a brief summary drawn up by the Dominicans and confirmed by James I shortly after the debate. It survives in two very similar versions, one from Barcelona and the other from Girona. The Hebrew account is a longer and considerably more detailed account written by Nachmanides himself, ostensibly at the bequest of the bishop of Girona. While there are some substantial differences between these two accounts of the disputation, including, most especially, who emerged victorious, both the Latin and the Hebrew accounts broadly agree that the four sessions corresponded to four essential propositions, all familiar topics in the long-standing Jewish-Christian debate. Significantly, both accounts also agree on a diverse attendance and the public nature of the gathering.

Latin Account (trans. Maccoby):

In the year of the Lord 1263, on the 20th of July, in the presence of the lord King of Aragon, and many others, barons, prelates, and religious and military persons in the palace of the lord King at Barcelona, when Moses, called Mater, a Jew, had been summoned from Gerona by the King himself at the instance of the Preaching friars [i.e. Dominicans], and was present in that same place together with many other Jews who seemed and were believed by the other Jews to be experts, Brother Paul

after discussion with the lord King and certain Friars...proposed to the said Jewish Master that he would prove...the following things in order...

Hebrew Account (trans. Nina Caputo):

Our lord the king commanded me to debate with Frai Paul before him and his council in his palace at Barcelona. I answered and said: I will do as you command, my lord king, if you give me permission to speak as I please. And I request in this matter permission of the king and of Frai Ramon de Peña Fort and his colleagues who are here.

A notable feature of Nachmanides's version of events is that he tells us a good deal more about the audience and their participation, including the involvement of the king. According to Vikuah, James of Aragon does not only presides over the debate but often interjects, asks questions, and generally moves the discussion along when an impasse is reached or a new topic is introduced. The Hebrew account also stresses the presence of the clerical and urban populace. Unlike the Christian account, the Hebrew version describes the four sessions taking place in two distinct locations. Both accounts agree that the first session was held on Friday in the presence of the king and his councilors in the palace. According to Nachmanides, the second was held "on the following Monday" at an unnamed cloister in the city.

Hebrew Account (trans. Caputo):

On that day the king went to the cloisters in the city and gathered there all of the people of the city, gentiles and Jews. And the bishop and all of the priests [ve-khol ha-galahim] and the Franciscan masters and preachers, and that same man [Frai Pul] rose to speak..... On the next day, the sixth day (of the week) they made arrangements to meet in the palace, and the king sat on his seat, from time to time on his seat near the wall [1 Sam 20:35]. The bishop and many of his ministers, and Giles de'Sergon, and Pere Barga, and many knights, and all those who are shunned [exiled?] from the city and the poor of the nation were there² [ve-khol mi-goreshei ha-'ir u-mi-dalat ha-'am].

The rabbi's failure to identify the cloister leaves the exact location of this second gathering open to speculation, and many commentators have ignored the passage altogether, but judging from Nachmanides' comments the change of venue seems to have been decided precisely to accommodate a larger crowd, thus opening the debate up to an even broader audience. So what cloister might this have been and who was the audience? I believe there is good reason to

place the location of this second session in the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina (the present Mercat de Santa Caterina), and that Dominican friars, ecclesiastical officials, and local councilmen were the intended public, not Jews.

The spread of the Dominican order in Catalonia was early and rapid. Miguel de Fabra was a member of Dominic's original group and was the first Dominican to hold a chair at the University of Paris. Fabra later founded houses in Catalonia and Aragon and became confessor of James I of Aragon, accompanying the king on his conquests to Valencia and Majorca. Fabra also organized the order's schools in Barcelona, no doubt bringing with him the scholastic methods of *lectio* and *disputatio* that were cultivated in the Paris curriculum. Official authorization for the convent of Santa Caterina came when Pope Innocent IV in April 1248 signed a bull for the construction of "a church and other buildings." Later that year the local bishop Pere de Centelles gave 2,000 *solidi* in financial support for the construction of a new church and convent. In 1252 James I bestowed further privileges on the convent when he granted that taxes collected at the city gate be given over to the convent, and in 1261 the buildings were sufficiently advanced and spacious enough to accommodate a meeting of the general chapter of the order. In a charter dated September 13, 1262, James I granted to the convent additional funds arriving from Tunisia, Sicily, and elsewhere so that the buildings could be completed without disturbance and without delay. Archaeological excavations undertaken in the late 1990s before the creation of the current market has confirmed the existence of the largest cloister in thirteenth-century Barcelona, measuring approximately twenty-eight meters by twenty five meters, centrally located near the cathedral, the marketplace, but just outside the city gate. Not only was the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina geographically and institutionally well placed for the staging of a "public" disputation, but it was the very convent where Raymond of Panyaforte, third master general of the Dominican order and Paul Christiani's personal mentor, spent some thirty-five years organizing his polemical and missionizing campaigns against Jews and Muslims. Moreover, at the second disputation in Paris c. 1269, where Pablo Christiani may well be one and the same with the said "Paul the convert from Spain" who disputed against the Jews, the surviving Hebrew account specifies that at one point a vast gathering took place in the "house of the Jacobins" (i.e. the Dominican convent in the rue St. Jacques; *Jacobus* in Latin).

No documents from the Dominican order have turned up to confirm the presence of a portion of the Barcelona disputation at the convent of St. Catherine's (very few from the thirteenth century survived the fire of 1835 that

destroyed the convent), but all the circumstantial evidence points in that direction: The size and prestige of the cloister, the central location in town, the royal patronage of James I, and the Dominican involvement in the art of disputation, both in Barcelona and in general. In addition, the newly formed Consell de Cent (municipal government) is known to have met in Santa Caterina in the late thirteenth century until it was granted a more official space elsewhere, although exactly when they began meeting in the convent is unclear. The Dominican convent, it would seem, was as public a space for official gatherings as any other at the time of the disputation in 1263 and there is no reason not to assume that members of the incipient municipal government could have been in attendance at the debate. Indeed, these may be the unnamed royal judges mentioned in the two accounts.

A striking feature of the Barcelona disputation is therefore not just the royal grandeur of the gathering, but how deliberately public it was. The Latin account does not mention the session in the cloister, but even the Christian version of events suggests that the disputation was above all an exercise in publicity.

Latin Account (trans. Maccoby):

Since he [Nachmanides] could not reply and had been defeated many times in public (pluries publice confusus), and both Jews and Christians were treating him with scorn, he said obstinately in front of everyone that he would not reply at all, because the Jews had told him not to, and some Christians namely Brother P. de Janua and some respectable citizens had sent to him to advise him not to reply at all. This lie was publicly refuted (fuit publice redargutus) by the said Brother P. and the respectable citizens. From this it was plain that he was trying to escape from the Disputation by lies.

Scholars have long debated who the true victor of this encounter actually was, since the two accounts offer such markedly different conclusions. But that is far from the most interesting, or meaningful, difference. In the Latin account, the implication is that the friar and the townsfolk wanted the debate to continue and that it was Nachmanides who was unable and unwilling to go on. Both accounts, in other words, make recourse to the wishes of the audience and spectators as a prime motivation for the continuation of the debate. According to the Hebrew account, a great gathering took place for this disputation that assembled a range of people out of the ordinary for a disputation. According to the Latin account, the disputation was conducted “in public” and Nachmanides’ defeat at the hands of Friar Paul was evident for everyone to behold. The stated outcomes may be contradictory, but their assumptions are the same.

Since no official decree was issued and no books burned (as was the case in Paris), an obvious question has to be: what did King James and the Dominicans hope the disputation would achieve? An often-cited theory suggests that the king was using the rising power of the Dominicans to counteract the pressure against him from the high nobility with whom he was almost at the point of civil war. A carefully staged triumph by the Dominicans in a disputation against the Jews would help in this political aim, since it would increase the prestige of the Dominicans and make them more powerful allies for the king. This geo-political approach to the question has often been accepted, but it assumes a level of political involvement and missionizing among the Dominicans that recent scholarship has shown to be considerably at odds with the pastoral care and education stressed by the local evidence. If the Barcelona disputation is instead viewed in the *longue durée* of Jewish-Christian disputations and broader cultural considerations are taken into account, a different sort of conclusion might be advanced. The distinctly public and open setting for the debate and the range of auditors on hand to observe the weeklong encounter instead suggests that this disputation was organized and geared toward a predominantly Christian public as an educative performance of theological truth. Moreover, if we entertain the convent of Santa Caterina as a likely location for the so-called second session, a more plausible solution emerges to the vexed question of exactly how the disputation fits into the broader missionizing program of the Dominicans. It was conducted in the presence of Dominican brethren not for the immediate purpose of conversion, but to provide a pre-arranged display of the art of disputation that brothers could learn from and absorb before going out into the field to preach. The “public” nature of the encounter is thus implicit in both the Latin and Hebrew accounts by virtue of the fact that the disputation was conducted, and indeed performed, before a broad audience of friars, royal and religious officials, and civil magistrates who also served the public interest. The possible hope for resulting conversions remains, but it is not the principal aim of the event.

In conclusion, the Barcelona encounter of 1263 might better be characterized as a public enactment of the practical and educative merits of disputation that Aquinas had articulated in his *Summa theologiae*. Since both sides emphasize their special skills in debate and both accounts make recourse to the many spectators who witnessed the event, it is reasonable to suggest that both Christians and Jews were imbued with a cultural understanding of what this encounter represented to their adversaries and to their own kin: namely, a public performance of their communal faith and identity. And this is fact the subject of my next work: performance as a category of historical analysis.

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