

The Disputation of Barcelona (1263): the Hebrew Report of Moshe Ben Nachman

OUR LORD THE KING commanded me to dispute with Friar Paul in his palace before him and his advisors in Barcelona. I replied: "I will do as the king commands, if you permit me to speak freely. I hereby request the permission of the king and the permission of Friar Raymond of Penaforte and his associates who are here." Friar Raymond of Penaforte replied: "So long as you do not utter blasphemies." I said to them: "I wish to observe your law in this regard. But I also wish to speak freely in debate, as you speak freely. I have the wisdom to speak properly in debate as you indicate, but it must be according to my will." They all gave me permission to speak freely.

I then said: "The debate between Christians and Jews concerns many matters of custom which are not essential. In this revered court, I wish to debate only matters that are essential.", They all said: "You have spoken properly." Thus, we agreed to speak first about the messiah -- whether he has already come as the Christians believe or if he is yet to come as the Jews believe. Subsequently, we shall discuss whether the messiah is divine or fully human, born of man and woman. Afterward we shall discuss whether the Jews observe the true law or whether the Christians do.

Then Friar Paul began, saying that he would prove from our Talmud that the messiah concerning whom the prophets testify has already come. I replied: "Before we debate this, I ask that he tell me how this is possible. Indeed while he was in Provence and in many other places, I heard that he said this to many Jews. But I am most surprised. Would he answer me in this regard? Does he mean to say that the sages of the Talmud believed in Jesus as the messiah and believed that he is both human and divine, as held by the Christians? However, it is well known that the incident of Jesus took place during the period of the Second Temple. He was born and killed prior to the destruction of the Temple, while the sages of the Talmud, like R. Akiba and his associates, followed this destruction. Those who compiled the Mishnah, Rabbi and R. Nathan, lived many years after the destruction. All the more so R. Ashi who compiled the Talmud, who lived about four hundred years after the destruction. If these sages believed that Jesus was the messiah and that his faith and religion were true and if they wrote these things from which Friar Paul intends to prove this, then how did they remain in the Jewish faith and in their former practice? For they were Jews, remained in the Jewish faith all their lives, and died Jews -- they and their children and their students who heard their teachings. Why did they not convert and turn to the faith of Jesus, as Friar Paul did? He understood from their words that the faith of the Christians is the true faith -- Heaven forbid -- and he went and converted as a result. But they and their students who learned Torah from them

remained and died Jews, as we are this day. . . If these sages believed in Jesus and in his faith, how is it that they did not do as Friar Paul, who understands their teachings better than they themselves do?"

Friar Paul responded: "These are lengthy observations, intended to cancel the debate. Nonetheless, you shall hear what I have to say." I said to them: "But this is clear proof that he shall not say anything of substance.

However, I shall hear his claims, because our lord the king wishes so." He began: "Behold Scriptures say, 'the scepter shall not pass from Judah, nor the staff from his descendants, until Shiloh comes, meaning the messiah. Thus the prophet says that Judah shall have power forever, until the coming of the messiah who will descend from Judah. Thus today, when you Jews have neither scepter nor staff, the messiah has already come, and he is of the seed of Judah, and his is the power.'" I responded and said: "It was not the prophet's intention to say that the rule of Judah would never be suspended. Rather, he said that it would not pass away and be annulled completely. This means that, so long as there be a monarchy in Israel, it should belong to Judah. If because of their sins it should be suspended, it would ultimately return to Judah. This is proved by the fact that, prior to Jesus, there was a long period during which ruling authority was suspended from Judah but not from Israel and a long period during which rule was suspended both from Israel and Judah. For during the seventy years of exile in Babylonia, neither Judah nor Israel enjoyed ruling authority. During the period of the Second Temple, only Zerubabel and his sons ruled briefly from Judah. There remained, however, 380 years to the destruction, during which priests of the Hasmonean family reigned."

Friar Paul replied: "Through all these times, even though the Jews had no kings, they did have authorities. For thus they explained in the Talmud: 'The scepter shall not pass from Judah' these are the exilarchs in Babylonia who control the people; 'Nor the staff from his descendants' these are the offspring of Hillel who teach the Torah publicly. Today, however, you do not have the ordination known in the Talmud. Thus even that authority has been annulled, for there is no one among you worthy of being designated 'rabbi.' That they call you 'magister' is an error, and you use that title deceitfully. . . I responded and said: "I shall show you that it was not the intention of the rabbis to explain this verse other than meaning actual kingship. However, you do not understand law and halakhah; you only understand a little aggadah, with which you have made yourself familiar. The matter which the sages mentioned concerns the fact that properly no man should judge a case on his own and be free of liability to pay in case of error, unless he receives permission from the patriarch, who is like a king. They said that during

the period of exile, since these are those of royal descent who have some authority from the Gentile kings, such as the exilarchs in Babylonia and the patriarchs in Palestine, they have the right to confer permission and ordination. This, however, took place among the sages of the Talmud, more than four hundred years after the death of Jesus. For it was not the view of the sages of the Talmud that this would constitute the scepter and the staff which come from the seed of Judah. Rather the prophet promised Judah that kingship over Israel would be his. He promised him actual kingship. Nonetheless this promise was suspended for a long period, as I have mentioned. During the period of exile in Babylonia there was no scepter or staff whatsoever, neither exilarch nor patriarch, for authority was held by the priests, the judges, the officers, or whoever they chose." Then Friar Peter of Janua responded: "This is true. The verse only says that kingship shall not cease entirely, but there might be a suspension . . ."

I said to the king: "Behold Friar Peter rules according to my view. "

Friar Peter said: "I have not made a ruling. For the seventy years in Babylonia constitutes a short time. There were still many who remembered the First Temple, as is written in the book of Ezra. This might be called a suspension ... However now that you have remained more than a thousand years without kingship, that is complete abolition.

I said: "Now you change your mind. However, the term 'abolition' cannot be used with a recurring phenomenon. Moreover, there is no distinction in the words of the prophet between a long suspension and a short suspension. Moreover, the period that I mentioned was lengthy. Moreover, our forefather Jacob did not promise Judah that he would hold the scepter and staff over his tribe only. Rather, he accorded Judah kingship over all Israel; as is written: 'Judah, your brothers shall praise you.' It is also written: 'Judah held the leading place among his brothers and fathered their rulers.' However kingship over all Israel was suspended from the time that Solomon died, as is written: 'The tribe of Judah alone followed the house of David.' Thus it is clear that the prophet said only that kingship would not pass completely, The truth is that, during the period of exile, it is not to be called annulment or abolition at all, for it does not involve Judah but the entire nation. For the prophet did not promise Judah that the people of Israel would never go into exile, so that he might be king over them at all times."

Friar Paul then claimed that in the Talmud it is said that the messiah has already come. He adduced the story in Midrash Lamentations concerning a man who was plowing and whose ox lowed. An Arab passed and said to him: "Jew, Jew, unhitch your ox, unhitch your ploughshare, unhitch your plough for the Temple has been destroyed." He unhitched his ox, unhitched his ploughshare, and unhitched his plough. The ox lowed a second time.

The Arab said to him: "Hitch up your ox, hitch up your ploughshare, hitch up your plough, for your messiah has been born."

I responded: "I do not believe in this story at all, but it is a proof for my view."

He then cried out: "Behold he denies their books."

I said: "Truly I do not believe that the messiah was born on the day of the destruction of the Temple. Thus this story is not true or else it has another meaning drawn from the secrets of the sages. However I shall accept it at its simple meaning as you claim, for it is a proof for my case. Behold it says that on the day of destruction, after the Temple was destroyed, the messiah was born. Thus Jesus was not the messiah, as you claim. For he was born and killed prior to the destruction of the Temple. In fact he was born about two hundred years prior to the destruction of the Temple. According to your reckoning, he was born seventy-three years prior to the destruction of the Temple." Then he was silent. Master William, the royal judge, then said: "The dispute does not now concern Jesus. The question is whether the messiah has come or not. You say that he has not come, and this book of yours says that he has come."

I said to him: "You choose, as is your custom, to respond craftily. Nonetheless I shall answer you. The sages did not say that the messiah has come. Rather they said that he was born. **For on the day that our teacher Moses was born, he did not come and redeem us. However, when he came before Pharaoh at the command of G-d and said to him: 'these are the words of the Lord -- Send forth My people!' then he may be said to have arrived. Likewise the messiah -- when he shall come before the pope and shall say to him at G-d's command: 'Send forth My people,' then he may be said to have come. However, to this day he has not yet come and is in no sense the messiah. For King David on the day that he was born was not the anointed one. Only when Samuel anointed him was he the anointed one. On the day that Elijah will anoint the messiah at G-d's command may he be called the messiah. On the day that he will subsequently come before the pope to redeem us, then he may be said to have arrived.**"

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.' " Friar Paul said: "I shall prove from the words of your sages that it speaks of the messiah."

I said to him: "It is true that the rabbis in the aggadah explain it as referring to the messiah. However, they never said that he would be killed at the hands of his enemies. For you will find in no book of the Jews, neither in the Talmud nor in the Midrash, that the messiah, the descendant of David, would be killed or would be turned over to his enemies or would be buried among the wicked. Indeed even the messiah whom you made for yourself was not buried. I shall explain for you this section properly and clearly, if you wish. There is no indication that the messiah would be killed, as happened to your messiah. They, however, did not wish to hear.

Friar Paul then said that, in the Talmud, it is indicated that R. Joshua b. Levi asked Elijah when the messiah would come. He answered him: "Ask the messiah himself. " He said "Where is he?" He said: "At the gate of Rome, among the sick." He went there and found him. He asked him ... Thus the messiah has already come, is in Rome, and is in fact Jesus who rules in Rome.

I said to him: "Isn't it clear from this that he has not come? For he asked Elijah when the messiah would come Likewise he asked the messiah himself: 'When will you come? Thus he has not yet come. Rather, according to the simple meaning of these stories, he was born already. But I do not believe this."

Then the king responded: "If he were born on the day of the destruction of the Temple, which was more than a thousand years ago and has not yet arrived, how will he arrive? For it is not human nature to live for a thousand years."

I said to him: "Conditions were set that I not debate with you and that you will not participate in the debate. However, already among early man Adam and Metushelach lived almost to a thousand years and Elijah and Enoch more than that, Metushelach lies in the hands of G-d." He said: "Where is he now?" I said: "This is not a necessary element in the debate, and I shall not respond. Maybe you can find him at the gates of Toledo, if you send there one of your couriers." I said it jokingly. They then rose, and the king set a time for resuming the debate, on the following Monday.

On that day the king went to the cloister in the city, where all the men of the city gathered, Gentiles and Jews. The bishop, all the clerics, and the sages of the Franciscans and Dominicans were there. Friar Paul rose to speak. I said to our lord the king: "My lord, hear me. " He said to me: "Let him speak first, since he is the interlocutor." I said: "Allow me to clarify my view concerning the messiah. Then he can reply to the clarification." I rose and said: "Listen all you people. Friar Paul asked me whether the

messiah of whom the prophets spoke has come. I said that he has not come. He then cited an aggadah which said that, on the very day the Temple was destroyed, the messiah was born. I then said that I do not believe this, although it is a proof for my view. Now I shall explain to you why I said that I do not believe this. Know that we Jews have three types of books. The first is the Bible, and we all believe it completely. The second is called Talmud, and it is a commentary on the merits of the Torah. For in the Torah there are 613 commandments and there is not one of them that is not explained in the Talmud. We believe in the Talmud concerning explanation of the commandments. We have yet a third book called Midrash, that is sermons. This is analogous to the bishop standing and giving a sermon, with one of the listeners deciding to write it. In regard to this book, those who believe it well and good, but those who do not believe it do no harm. We have sages who wrote that the messiah will not be born until close to the time ordained for redeeming us from exile. Therefore I do not believe in this book, where it says that he was born on the day of the destruction of the Temple. We also call this book aggadah, that is, stories, meaning that these are only things which one person tells another. However, I shall accept this aggadah literally, as you wish, because it is an explicit proof that Jesus is not the messiah, as I said to you, because he was not born on that day.

Rather, by that time, everything related to him had already transpired long before. "Now you, our lord the king, asked and objected properly that it is not human nature to live a thousand years. Now I shall explain to you the answer to your questions. Behold Adam lived a thousand years minus seventy. Moreover, it says explicitly in Scriptures that he died because of his sin; had he not sinned, he would have lived much more or even forever. Both the Gentiles and the Jews agree that the sin and punishment of Adam will be annulled during messianic times. Thus after the messiah comes, it will be annulled from all of us, but with the messiah himself it will be completely annulled.

Thus the messiah is capable of living thousands of years or even forever. Thus Psalms says: 'He asked of Thee life, and Thou didst give it him, length of days for ever and ever.' You further asked, our lord the king, where he is now. It is already indicated in Scriptures. For Adam lived in terrestrial paradise. When he sinned, it is said: 'So the Lord G-d drove him out of the Garden of Eden.' Thus, one who is free from the punishment of Adam's sin lives there in paradise. Thus said the sages in the book of aggadah which I mentioned. The king said: "Did you not say in the same aggadah that he was in Rome." I said to him "I did not say that he lived in Rome, only that he appeared in Rome on a particular day. For Elijah told the sage that he would find him there on that day . . ." This is the content of the debates. I have not consciously altered a detail. Subsequently, on that same day, I stood before our lord the king and he said: "Let the dispute be suspended. For I have never seen a man whose case is wrong argue it as well as you"