

## The Hebrew language of the Disputation of Barcelona. A reappraisal

*Francesco BIANCHI*

Associazione Biblica Italiana. *ORCID*: 0000-0003-2827-2908

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**Abstract.** The Disputation of Barcelona, which took place on 20 and 24 July 1263, between Mošeh ben Naḥman and the Dominican friar Pau Christià, has been extensively studied by researchers. In recent years, scholars have scrutinized the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, a Hebrew account of the debate commonly attributed to Naḥmanides, to compare it with the Latin reports and determine its historical significance. This paper aims to assess the *Vikkuaḥ* as a piece of polemical literature, by analyzing its textual tradition, language, style, and literary elements, to ascertain whether Naḥmanides was its author. Through careful examination, I hope to determine whether the *Vikkuaḥ* is an accurate historical account, a work of fiction, or an original piece of literature crafted by Naḥmanides to educate his fellow Jews about the new missionary techniques of the Dominican order.

**Keywords:** Disputation of Barcelona, *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, Mošeh ben Naḥman, Jewish-Christian polemical literature

## La llengua hebrea de la Disputa de Barcelona. Una revaloració

**Resum.** La Disputa de Barcelona, que va tenir lloc els dies 20 i 24 de juliol de 1263 entre Mossé ben Nahman i el frare dominic Pau Cristià, ha estat objecte d'interminables investigacions. En els darrers anys també s'ha estudiat àmpliament el Vikkuah Ramban, l'informe hebreu del debat atribuït gairebé universalment a la ploma de Nahmànides, per comparar-lo amb els informes llatins i determinar-ne el valor històric. Aquest article pretén revisar de nou aquesta peça de literatura polèmica; s'analitzarà la tradició textual de la Vikkuah, així com la seva llengua, estil i aspectes literaris per establir si Nahmànides la va escriure realment. L'examen acurat ajudarà a aclarir si la Vikkuah és un informe històric precís, una mera ficció o més aviat una subtil peça de literatura que Nahmànides va compondre per donar a conèixer als seus companys jueus la nova tècnica missionera de l'orde dominicà.

**Paraules clau:** Disputa de Barcelona, Vikkuah Ramban, Mossé ben Nahman, literatura polèmica judeocristiana

### 1. Introduction

There is a well-known saying in Latin, *habent sua fata libelli*, which can be applied to the present article. On 14 June 2013, the MUHBA (Museu de Historia de Barcelona) organized a conference to commemorate the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Disputation of Barcelona, at which I presented the initial draft of this article. After waiting in vain for the publication of the conference proceedings, I finally published my paper on my web page at academia.edu. Since then, the paper has been viewed by a considerable number of readers, which has inspired me to revise and improve it. It gives me great pleasure, after 11 years, to dedicate it to Enric Cortès i Minguella and Josep Maria Llobet i Portella, who have greatly contributed to the study of Catalan Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

1. I would like to thank R. A. Di Gesù (MA in Hebrew Studies and Ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2007; and MA in Arab Studies from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2023), who kindly revised and improved a first draft of this article. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful observations.

## 2. The Disputation of Barcelona in modern research

After 761 years, the Disputation of Barcelona between Mošeh ben Naḥman, or Naḥmanides, and the Dominican friar Pau Christià, which spanned four days (20–24 July) in 1263, continues to be the subject of fruitful research.<sup>2</sup> The seminal works of R. Chazan and J. Cohen have inspired younger scholars to explore various aspects of the event and its texts, such as the role of the Dominican Order, the true meaning of the disputation,<sup>3</sup> the historical and cultural context of the kingdom of Jaume I the Conqueror,<sup>4</sup> the disputation's relationship with other religious encounters, and dynamics between Jews and apostates.<sup>5</sup> One significant focus of research has been the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, the Hebrew account of the debate, commonly attributed to Naḥmanides. While questions have been raised about the historical accuracy of this polemical work, less attention has been devoted to its textual, historical, and literary features. Therefore, my paper aims to examine those aspects. To begin with, I will provide a brief overview of the textual tradition of the Hebrew text, about which U. Ragacs has written at length; by extensively researching ancient evidence of the text, we can gain valuable insights into its authorship. Is Naḥmanides truly the author of the *Vikkuaḥ* or is it a more recent piece of literature, as suggested by J. Riera i Sans?<sup>6</sup> I will then turn my attention to the language, style, and literary aspects of the *Vikkuaḥ*. Such analysis will help us to identify connections with Naḥmanides's other works, as well as literary techniques and influences from medieval culture. Furthermore, we will have the opportunity to determine the historical significance of the *Vikkuaḥ*: is it a reliable, accurate historical account or is it purely a work of fiction? Alternatively, can a more nuanced explanation be found somewhere between those two poles?

## 3. Textual evidence

Earlier scholars were not fully aware of the textual problems posed by the *Vikkuaḥ*. The manuscript from Strasbourg which J. Chr. Wagenseil used in

2. For a history of previous research, see CAPUTO, 'The Barcelona Disputation'.

3. VOSE, Dominicans.

4. CAPUTO, Nahmanides. See also VERNET I PONS, 'La Bíblia', about the Bible of Vic.

5. KRUGER, The spectral Jew.

6. RIERA I Sans and FELIU, *Disputa*, p. 7.

1681 for the first printed edition in *Tela Ignea Satanae* was known to have significant flaws and offensive additions made by a German copyist. It is, thus, more a cultural curiosity than a useful research tool. The version of the text included in the *Millhemet hovah* (Constantinople, 1710) is a copy of a lost manuscript.<sup>7</sup> In 1860, M. Steinschneider published his edition after meticulously comparing it with Ms. Saraval 26a from Breslau and a manuscript from Leiden. Chavel<sup>8</sup> used Steinschneider's work for the two standard printed editions, which, however, still contain various textual problems. It is important to note that none of these versions, including the smaller ones,<sup>9</sup> brought together all the manuscript evidence of the Vikkuah. Doing so became even more crucial after J. Riera i Sans<sup>10</sup> concluded that the Vikkuah was composed solely between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. U. Ragacs<sup>11</sup> deserves credit for gathering all the manuscripts of the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban together and cataloging them according to their date and script. Meticulous examination and analysis of various texts have revealed that copies of the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban text were already in existence in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. For example, a miscellaneous manuscript from the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma (Ms. Parma Biblioteca Palatina 2749), dating back to 1300, contains a single fragment of the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban (§ 61), which discusses debating the messianic value of Daniel 9:25. The inclusion of this folio in the manuscript has raised questions about its dating. Still, as U. Ragacs<sup>12</sup> has noted elsewhere, the presence of the medieval transcription of the Catalan word *dux* suggests an early date.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a manuscript from Cambridge written in Byzantine script is believed to be from around 1387, while two other manuscripts, from the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma and Paris, are dated from between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

7. RAGACS, 'Geordnete Verhältnisse', p. 158. See also YISRAELI, 'The "messianic idea"', p. 24–25 fn. 3. I was unable to consult Oded YISRAELI, *Nahmanides. An intellectual biography*, Jerusalem, 2020.

8. CHAVEL, 1963.

9. SMILÉVITCH, *La dispute*; BIANCHI, *La "Disputa di Barcellona"*.

10. RIERA I SANS and FELIU, *Disputa*, p. 7.

11. RAGACS, 'Geordnete Verhältnisse'.

12. RAGACS, 'Geordnete Verhältnisse', p. 87–88. See also CASANELLAS, 'Noms propis'.

13. The Genuan trader Inghetto Contardo had already asked his Jewish interlocutors about the Hebrew book of the disputation during his debate in Majorca (1286). See LIMOR, *Die Disputationen*, and idem, 'Polemical varieties'.

Three additional pieces of evidence corroborate the existence of a Hebrew manuscript of the *Vikkuaḥ* Ha-Ramban in the same period. The first comes from a collection of books owned by Moses Almateri, a tradesman, money-lender and Talmud scholar. Born in Xàtiva in 1310, he died in Majorca in 1362, leaving behind 134 books, which are listed in an inventory published by J. Riera i Sans.<sup>14</sup> Of particular note is item #39, the *sefer auicoha* (*quendam alium librum ebraicum voccatum ceffer a-luicoha, in papiro scriptum*), which the publisher mistakenly attributed to Maimonides,<sup>15</sup> disregarding any connection with Ramban's work. Another noteworthy item is #103, *De disputatione magistri Mosse*, a title the publisher translated as "La Disputa de Mossé ben Nachman".<sup>16</sup> The inventory describes it as a *librum hebraicum*, i.e. a Hebrew book, despite its Latin title.

In a review article on Riera i Sans's book,<sup>17</sup> J. Perarnau i Espelt also emphasizes the existence of a copy of the *Vikkuaḥ* in the same period. According to Perarnau i Espelt, the *Speculum Hebraeorum*<sup>18</sup> mentions a book, available in Jewish libraries, which describes a debate between Fr. Paul and Rabbi Mošeh from Girona. Entitled *Disputatio Nachmanis* in Latin and reportedly authored by Rabi Astruch de Porta, the book celebrates the triumph of the Jewish hero. The first edition of the *Speculum Hebraeorum* dates back to 1333, when the Portuguese culture was heavily influenced by the Catalan culture. On that basis, Perarnau i Espelt concludes that the author of the *Speculum Hebraeorum* may have taken inspiration from a similar work written by Mošeh ben Naḥman.

The third *testimonium* comes from the writings of Alfonso de Valladolid, previously known as Abner de Burgos (1270–1350). Alfonso was an erudite Jew who converted to Christianity when he was in his fifties. He wrote several polemical works, the most significant being *Moreh Tzedeq*. Translated into

14. RIERA I SANS, 'Cent trenta-nou'.

15. RIERA I SANS, 'Cent trenta-nou', p. 26 and p. 30. As far as I know, the works of Maimonides do not include such a title. Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera (1220–1290) wrote a *Sefer Vikkuaḥ* in the second half of the 13th century: it is a dialogue between an orthodox Jew and a philosopher on the harmony of philosophy and religion. It seems far more economical to think of our *Vikkuaḥ* Ha-Ramban.

16. RIERA I SANS, 'Cent trenta-nou', p. 28 and p. 34: item *quendam alium librum hebraicum / de disputatione magistri Mossè*.

17. PERARNAU I ESPELT, 'Sobre el protocol', p. 273–275.

18. A polemical work written by the Portuguese monk João of Alcobaca. On Portuguese works of polemical literature, see TAVARES, 'Literatura'.

Spanish under the title of *Mostrador de Justicia* (in around 1350), this work contains an extensive collection of both biblical and postbiblical Hebrew material. R. Szpiech observes that this comprehensive work demonstrates a profound understanding of the Hebrew text of the *Vikkuah*. Its firm support for Pau Christià's arguments makes the *Moreh Tzedeq* an extension of the Disputation of Barcelona,<sup>19</sup> with the same purpose of converting the author's former co-religionists.

A survey of the textual evidence demonstrates that, from the end of 1300 and in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a Hebrew report on the disputation was scattered around the Jewish world and its existence was equally known to Christians. Around the same time, Nahmanides may have written another text, possibly in Catalan – the language used in the debate<sup>20</sup> – at the request of the bishop of Girona, Pere de Castellnou.<sup>21</sup> The reason for this request is not clearly explained: Caputo<sup>22</sup> suggests that it may have been intellectual curiosity, as the prelate and Nahmanides shared a cultural environment, shaped by the reign of Jaume I and reflected in various literary works. Alternatively, Pere de Castellnou may have seen the debate as a medieval disputation that required a booklet with the *quaestiones disputatae*.<sup>23</sup>

However, the appearance of this booklet, in which Nahmanides expressed his viewpoint, contradicted Ramon de Penyafort's initial idea. Ramon believed that the aim of the fictional interlocutor in the *quaestio* was only to raise doubts and distort the text of the *auctoritas*. With his presence, the master<sup>24</sup> would be able to illuminate the truth and reaffirm the genuine interpretation of the text. Notwithstanding, this text is now lost and all that remains is the Hebrew version of the *Vikkuah* Ha-Ramban.<sup>25</sup>

19. Szpiech, *From testimonia*, p. 565–572.

20. On this matter, see MILLER, *Jewish multiglossia*, p. 125–126.

21. In *Una història* (p. 69), MARQUES deals briefly with Pere de Castellnou. Curiously, as AMADOR DE LOS RÍOS (*Historia social*, p. 7–10) noted, after the death of Jaume I, Pere de Castellnou led the clergy and population of Girona to attack the local Jewish *aljama*, and King Pere III had to request that he cease to do so.

22. CAPUTO, *Nahmanides*, p. 172–173.

23. On medieval disputation, see NOVIKOFF, *The medieval culture*.

24. On these remarks, see ALESSIO, 'Scolastica', p. 1018. The master seems to be both a fighting warrior and an exorcising priest. In a way, as SMILÉVITCH (*La dispute*, p. 14) aptly notes, Ramon de Penyafort saw the disputation as a circumvention of the crusade.

25. The choice of Hebrew is easy to understand: R. Salomon ben Abraham ibn Parhon, a scholar who lived in North Africa and then Italy in the 12th century, noted that among the

*An examination of the language and style of the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban*

In R. Chazan's words,<sup>26</sup> the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban is "a literary tour de force... a masterpiece of Jewish polemical literature" and, at the same time, "a carefully crafted record aimed at creating a certain set of impressions in the mind of its readers". A. Tostado Martín<sup>27</sup> and F. Bianchi<sup>28</sup> have also come to similar conclusions by closely examining its language and style. Naḥmanides's Hebrew lies somewhere between Biblical Hebrew and Rabbinic Hebrew, and he combines elements of both. From Biblical Hebrew, he makes use of the construct state (similar to *šel*), masculine plural – *īm* and feminine – *ôt* pronoun suffixes, certain "archaic" adverbs (like *zûlatî*) and prepositions, the relative pronoun *ʾašer*, all seven conjugations, and, occasionally, the *waw* consecutive followed by apocopated forms (Vikkuah § 1; § 20). From Rabbinic Hebrew, he uses the participle as the present tense, the construction *ʾattid* plus infinitive to describe a future action, *raṣitî* plus infinitive for the conditional, a variety of temporal, hypothetical, and adversative prepositions, and negative adverbs.

The field of language encompasses a range of terms used to describe Christian figures (such as *ʾafifior*, "pope"; *hegemon*, "bishop"; and *galahîm*, "priest") or theological concepts (such as *šillûš*, "Trinity"). In contrast, the Hebrew nouns follow a specific pattern or are formed with the abstract suffix – *ût*. References to the religious sphere (such as *dat*, *hôq* and *ʾemûnâ*) or the realm of truth (*ʾemet*) can be found throughout. Additionally, there are occasional Latin words (*vagare*, *sermones*, *specularia*) and Spanish-Catalan terms (such as *kloister*, "cloister"; *meistre*, "master"; *razonamiento*, "reasoning"; and *dia*, "day"). Notably, there are no loanwords from Arabic.<sup>29</sup> Based on the evi-

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Ishmaelites (i.e. in the Arab world) everyone spoke the same language, while in the Edomite lands (i.e. in the Christian countries) there were so many different tongues that the Jews who lived there used the holy language as a means of communication. We can agree with ABRAHAM'S (*Jewish life*, p. 360–361) that Hebrew was still "a literary language... of great flexibility and handiness, that was at the hand of many people".

26. CHAZAN, 1993, p. 101.

27. TOSTADO MARTÍN, *La Disputa*, 1985, p. 79–80. I was able to consult TOSTADO MARTÍN, *La Disputa*, 2009.

28. Bianchi, *La "Disputa di Barcellona"*, p. 77–78; Bianchi, 'The Hebrew language'.

29. Overall, I cannot agree with the harsh judgment of MACCOBY (*Judaism*, p. 78), according to whom the Hebrew text of the Vikkuah Ha-Ramban lacks revision, shows signs of hasty composition, and contains inaccuracies in biblical and Talmudic quotations.

dence within the text, P. Casanellas<sup>30</sup> has demonstrated that certain words have ancient Catalan origins and were used by Naḥmanides in Hebrew (or Catalan) compositions.

All in all, the linguistic traits referred to above are even more extraordinary when we consider that Naḥmanides's interpretive works typically have a complex, intricate style. It has been called "musive",<sup>31</sup> as it is often classical and formal in nature and frequently makes use of explicit and implicit references from the Bible and the Talmud. The vocabulary he uses in such works can also be deemed complex.<sup>32</sup> This brief overview only makes the language and style of the *Vikkuaḥ* more striking. Its vocabulary is limited and straightforward, and its sentences are concise and impactful. It avoids any embellishment and aims to convey the intense atmosphere of the debate to the reader, something Naḥmanides also achieved through careful selection of verbs, which evoke the biblical style so fittingly described by R. Alter.<sup>33</sup> The verbs *'amar* ("to say"), *'anâ* ("to answer") and *sā'al* ("to question") frame both the direct speeches and the subsequent dialogues. Through the verbs used, Naḥmanides's personality overshadows that of Pau Christià. For instance, Naḥmanides uses the verb *šā'aq* ("to cry") to describe Pau Christià's lack of control (*Vikkuaḥ* § 51). Contrastingly, he employs the verb *šāmaḥ* ("to be happy") to express his own self-assurance. The verbs *'amad* and *qûm* indicate movement before the start or end of the conversation. The verb *hālak* ("to go") is used to describe simple movement. These verbs might imply a type of stage, as E. Smilévitch suggests.<sup>34</sup> Each character has a role to play and a script to follow, but we are merely in the biblical narrative realm. Between the realms of style and literature, there is a significant use of the first person in the report. As N. Caputo has emphasized,<sup>35</sup> Naḥmanides speaks in the past tense when he is the narrator and the commentator,<sup>36</sup> whereas he constantly

30. CASANELLAS, 'Noms propis'.

31. SEPTIMUS, "Open rebuke and concealed love", p. 26–27.

32. CHAZAN, *Barcelona*, p. 111; IDEL and PERANI, *Nahmanide*, p. 31–32.

33. ALTER, *The art*, p. 65–72.

34. SMILÉVITCH, *La dispute*, p. 11. Y. Valier directed a theatre play based on the Disputation of Barcelona and inspired by R. Doliner's drama *Divine Right*. VALIER, 'Dramaturgical and theological issues', reflects on that experience.

35. CAPUTO, *Nahmanides*, p. 107.

36. We must not forget that the voice of the narrator and the voice of the commentator are to be found in all medieval literature that seeks to reflect orality and experience as closely as possible.



uses the present tense when he is the subject. Thus, “the contrast between the author as narrator and as subject preserves the memory of the encounter in a perpetually dynamic temporality.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Literary features*

Naḥmanides may have aimed to establish a personal connection with the reader to emphasize the truthfulness of his report and provide guidance for similar situations. In my view, the use of the first person reflects a stylistic approach commonly found in various biblical texts, where use of the first person enhances the significance of the recounted autobiographical wisdom of Kohelet and in the prophetic books.<sup>38</sup> However, it is particularly ubiquitous in the biblical books set in or after the end of the Babylonian exile, such as Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Although there are no direct references to these books in the *Vikkuaḥ*, their central characters frequently interact with pagan kings for the sake of their people in a hostile environment. Daniel must confront challenges to his faith in a society that worships numerous gods, while also navigating the unpredictable intentions of a king.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah must negotiate with Persian kings to ensure observance of the law and the future of Jerusalem. They encounter Babylonian and Persian kings who, to some extent, show friendship and interest in their lives, religion and concerns. Naḥmanides sought to underline the resemblance between the past and his situation at the time, with the exile being a predominant worry in his mind. To expand on this comparison, I will draw upon the memoir of Nehemiah.<sup>40</sup> Many scholars concur that Nehemiah’s memoir can be seen as an autobiography, albeit one with some exaggerated self-praise. However, the accounts of this Jewish governor from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. are generally considered to be trustworthy in terms of documenting his actions. Nevertheless, there are scholars, such as D. J. Clines,<sup>41</sup> who have highlighted the potential drawbacks of relying on autobiographical works. Nehemiah

37. Caputo, *Naḥmanides*, p. 107.

38. CHAZAN, *Barcelona*.

39. As far as the book of Daniel is concerned, Naḥmanides focused on the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and not on Daniel’s adventures at the Babylonian court.

40. BIANCHI, *Esdra-Neemia*.

41. CLINES, *The perils*.

may have embellished his importance, selflessness, energy and worthiness. To explore this possibility within Nehemiah's memoir, Clines identified four main areas of scrutiny: Nehemiah's thoughts, intentions, emotions and motivations; the thoughts, intentions, emotions and motivations of other characters; matters of time, sequence and narrative compression; and instances of withholding information. Let us now apply this framework to the *Vikkuah Ha-Ramban*.

In terms of the first area, which corresponds to the inner world of Nahmanides, he portrays himself as a sage who is well versed in all aspects of his faith. He is adept at interacting with the king, adhering to the highest standards of courtly etiquette, and can even engage in banter with his adversaries. He also exhibits knowledge and skill in discussing the Christian faith, effortlessly navigating the traps set by the convert Pau Christià, and even ridicules his opponent's inability to correctly understand either the Halakah or the Haggadah.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding the second area, which corresponds to the other characters, the antagonist, Pau Christià, is depicted in a shadowy way, with no details about his past or present. Nahmanides highlights Pau Christià's incompetence and lack of knowledge throughout his account.<sup>43</sup> This portrayal suggests that Pau Christià's academic background in Judaism may have been mediocre, although that judgement is likely influenced by polemics. Pau Christià, who was previously known as Saul of Montpelier, had indeed received a rabbinic education.<sup>44</sup> He had studied under Rabbi Eliezer of Tarascon and had a strong affinity for Haggadot, basing his argument on haggadic materials. While it is possible that his conversion to Christianity was a result of the Maimonidean Controversy that upset the cultured Jewish communities of Provence and Montpellier, there is no mention of the specific circumstances that led him to embrace his new faith. His chosen baptismal name reflects his desire to liken himself "not only to a paradigmatic convert but also to a fierce disputant against Judaism, as many chapters in the Act of Apostles easily

42. CHAZAN, *Barcelona*, p. 115. In R. Chazan's words, Nahmanides is a sort of "folk hero". According to SMILÉVITCH (*La dispute*, p. 1), Nahmanides is an artist, able to overcome the limits he suffered at the beginning of the debate.

43. Wagenseil's code goes further and lists a series of invectives against Pau Christià: he is the evil one, the godless one, the heretic and, last but not least, "an ass".

44. CHAZAN (*Barcelona*, p. 25-27) considers him "the scion of a prominent family who attended one or more of the major academies of the region".

show.<sup>45</sup> Nahmanides saw Pau Christià as an example of an apostate who became a menace to his former co-religionists.<sup>46</sup> N. Caputo suggests that Nahmanides was deeply concerned with distinguishing between apostates and Jews. Nahmanides recognized that the issue was not the relationship with the Christians, as they were not idolaters at all, but with the former Jews.<sup>47</sup> In response to Simcha Goldin's question<sup>48</sup> as to whether apostates were still considered brothers, Nahmanides would have answered in the negative.

King Jaume of Aragon, one of the main characters in this narrative, is depicted in a truly magnificent manner. While Nahmanides recalls King Jaume's Christian education and its limitations, he also highlights the respect and kindness the king showed him. Nahmanides places great importance on politeness and impeccable manners. In the opening words of the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, he emphasizes the king's ability to behave courteously, a trait known as *mûsar* in Hebrew. Additionally, in his commentary on the Torah, Nahmanides seeks examples of similar polite behavior in the lives of the patriarchs, suggesting that he and the king share a code of ethics. To further support that suggestion, Nahmanides recounts two instances where the king expressed his displeasure at a lack of courtesy shown by Pau Christià and Arnau de Segarra.

Among the various characters surrounding the trio of Nahmanides, Pau Christià and King Jaume, one of the most prominent is Fr. Ramon de Penafort, the true *deus ex machina* of the debate.<sup>49</sup> He is present in the *Vikkuaḥ* at the beginning, when he grants Nahmanides freedom of speech, provided he does not harm the Christian faith, and at the end, with a short speech about the Trinity, which he delivers during the Sabbath service in the synagogue of Barcelona.

45. KRUGER, *The spectral Jew*, p. 164–165.

46. Little is known about Pau Christià's career after the encounter in Barcelona. He continued his activity as a missionary and disputant in both the south of France and Paris (RAGACS, 'Geordnete Verhältnisse'), attacking the Talmud and moneylending, and even exhuming baptized Jews who had returned to their religion (SHATZMILLER, 'Paulus Christiani'). In a letter, Jacob ben Eliah, a Spanish Jew who fled to Venice, accused Pau Christià of having taken his two children away from his wife and turned them into Christians (CHAZAN, 'The letter', p. 58–59).

47. The introductory quotation from the Talmudic Tractate Sanhedrin on the fate of Jesus's five disciples lends weight to that interpretation.

48. GOLDIN, 'Juifs'.

49. COHEN, *The friars*, p. 103–108; see also SANTI, 'Raimundo'.

Fr. Arnau de Segarra, who was prior of the Convent of Santa Caterina at the time, also participated in the debate.<sup>50</sup> The *Vikkuaḥ* includes two brief but significant interventions he made. In his first intervention, he discusses the meaning of the word *yôm* in Hebrew, referring to Jerome's authority to support the interpretation that the plural *yamîm* also means "years" (*Vikkuaḥ* § 67).<sup>51</sup> His second intervention occurs during a heated argument regarding a quotation from Maimonides's tractate *Shoftim* (*Vikkuaḥ* §§ 74–75), in which he accuses Maimonides of lying<sup>52</sup> and Naḥmanides eventually rebukes him. Unfortunately, we do not have any information about the Franciscan friar Peter from Genoa. Naḥmanides stresses the impressive audience that witnessed the debate, reflecting the medieval fascination with theatre and the power of the human voice in shaping reality.

The third area of scrutiny and its subcategories provide an opportunity to compare the *Vikkuaḥ* and Latin protocols of the event more closely. After the debate, the friars created a written record, two copies of which still exist. The first copy, bearing the royal seal, originated from the Royal Archive of Barcelona, while the slightly different second copy was stored in a *cartularium* in Girona. In terms of time, the *Vikkuaḥ* Ha-Ramban states that the disputation lasted four days, whereas the Latin protocol condenses the event to just one day, possibly for the sake of brevity in bureaucratic documentation. Regarding the location, both sources mention the presence of large numbers of nobles and priests at the royal palace or in the cloister. This audience was not always silent. According to the Latin protocol, both Jews and Christians shouted in response to Naḥmanides's underwhelming performance in the face of Pau Christià's arguments. In the Hebrew protocol, Jews and Christians alike implored Naḥmanides to end the disputation, due to their fear of his honesty and the potential reaction of the audience. The texts contain references to the Messiah from biblical and rabbinical sources, including pas-

50. As a founder of the convents of Girona and Murcia, and spiritual father of Jaume I, Arnau de Segarra implemented the missionary ideas of Ramon de Penyafort in relation to Jews and Muslims and acted as censor of the Talmud and chief inquisitor of the kingdom (from 1265 to 1269).

51. CAPUTO (*Nahmanides*, p. 159–161) emphasizes the importance of the debate about the word *yôm*. The presence of an anonymous Jew, who confirms the basic meaning of *yôm*, i.e. *dia* ("day") in Catalan, is supposed to underline that the entire discussion is set in exile.

52. A Latin document issued by the king in 1265 ordered that all copies of Maimonides's tractate *Shoftim* be burned due to it blaspheming against Jesus Christ.

sages from the Book of Daniel, Genesis 49:10, Psalms 20:2 and Isaiah 52. The Talmudic lore also mentions a story of the Messiah at Rome's gate and in Gan Eden. Now, let us briefly compare the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban's* arguments to the rest of Naḥmanides's ideas. There are few concrete connections with Naḥmanides's commentary on the Torah. In *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* § 12, there is a reference to the priestly descendants of Hasmonean kings, which also appears in the commentary on Genesis 49:10. In the latter, however, Naḥmanides denies that the priests can be kings. Nevertheless, the same passage contains a similar description of the exile after the destruction of the first temple. Other texts discussed in this opus magnum and to which the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* refers are Deuteronomy 30:7 and Leviticus 26:12, which Naḥmanides uses to express his ideas about the present exile and future redemption.

Regarding the Messiah, the focus of the debate in Barcelona, O. Yisraeli<sup>53</sup> recently pointed out the non-linear development of Naḥmanides's thought. On the one hand, in the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, following the teaching of Maimonides, Naḥmanides portrays the Messiah as a political, military and religious leader who will defeat all pagan nations. This messianism is aimed at rejecting the Christian view of Jesus as the Messiah. However, in the commentary on the Torah, a somewhat different and, it can be said, utopian vision emerges, since the focus shifts from the figure of the Messiah to the so-called "days of the Messiah". As the commentary on Leviticus 26:11 shows, this is a utopian vision in which earthly nature will change radically: humans will cease to follow their evil inclinations, while predatory animals will return to being herbivores, as before Adam's sin. In this fascinating portrayal, it is possible to perceive the influence of kabbalistic doctrines, which renounce the figure of the Messiah. Still, there is a third development, and it is found in the *Sefer Ge'ullah*. The figure of the Messiah ends up being rendered insignificant, replaced with the expectation of life in the world to come. Naḥmanides's aim in making the figure of the Messiah insignificant was to prevent Christians from using it to anti-Jewish ends.

In contrast to the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* (§ 100), the commentary on Genesis 1:2 does not mention the Midrashic interpretation of *Berešit Rabba* II 4, according to which the words of the verse represent the four kingdoms de-

53. YISRAELI, "The 'messianic idea'", p. 22–39.

scribed in the Book of Daniel.<sup>54</sup> Nahmanides also refers to the Book of Isaiah, to Jeremiah 31:33–34, and, above all, to the Book of Daniel. These sources are particularly important in *Sefer Ge'ullah*, where Nahmanides discusses Daniel's teaching about the coming of the Messiah and the related historical events.<sup>55</sup> For example, he identifies Zerubbabel as the prince described in Daniel 9:25 and emphasizes that fulfillment of the *mitzvot* is the gateway to the coming of the Messiah. Although Nahmanides does not openly refer to his kabbalistic interpretations, the mention of "the secrets of the masters" in relation to the interpretation of the Haggadah could allude to them.

In my opinion, the aspect of so-called "restraint" is of great importance. In the case of Nehemiah's memoir, Clines stated that such restraint stems from the psychology of the author or from the plot of the narrative. Our case is more problematic. If the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* were a work of public instruction, as M. Cohen and R. Chazan have said, it would aim to reassure the Jewish audience about the coming of the Messiah; the "happy ending" would be of crucial importance. Such a situation could, in some cases, indicate deliberate restraint. Let us begin with Nahmanides's free speech against the Christian faith. At the beginning of the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, Nahmanides emphasizes that he had asked the king and Ramon de Penyafort for unrestricted freedom of speech and had received it. In all the debates, however, Nahmanides is constantly on the defensive; in his own words, he obeys a king's order and is forced to answer Pau Christià's questions under pressure from the king. A decree issued from the Royal Court of Barcelona in April 1265 blurs matters. According to the decree, Bonastruc de Porta (alias Nahmanides) was to be brought before the king because Ramon de Penyafort and other friars had accused him of having "spoken some contemptuous words against Our Lord and all the Catholic faith and to have drawn from them also a book, a copy of which he gave to the bishop of Girona."<sup>56</sup> Bonastruc countered that those words had been uttered under the freedom of

54. Genesis 1:2 states: "The earth was formless (*tohu*) and empty (*bohu*), darkness (*hošek*) was over the surface of the deep (*tehom*), and the Spirit of God (*ruah 'elohim*) was hovering over the waters." Following Midrash, Nahmanides relates these four words to Babylon, Media, Greece and Edom (Rome) respectively, while the Spirit of God is the Spirit of the Messiah.

55. IDEL and PERANI, *Nahmanide*, p. 97–106.

56. DENIFLE, 1887, p. 243.

speech the king had granted him at the beginning of the disputation.<sup>57</sup> Since the plaintiffs did not accept the royal judgement, under which Nahmanides was condemned to a two-year ban and his book was to be burned,<sup>58</sup> the king fined and acquitted Nahmanides.<sup>59</sup> Nahmanides and Jaume seem to have been playing a sort of “*gioco delle parti*” (to borrow Pirandello’s term). Nahmanides may have agreed to participate in the disputation to protect his community and avoid upsetting Jaume I. For his part, Jaume I permitted the Dominicans to deliver sermons in the synagogues, and he also gave a speech on the Trinity in the synagogue of Barcelona. Despite this, he exempted the Jews from attending preaching outside the calls *judaica* and defended them as they belonged to the royal chamber.

Another sign of restraint could be the role of the Dominicans in the debate and the conclusion of the debate itself. In the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban*, Nahmanides assigns an overwhelming victory to himself and labels Pau Christià the instigator of the disputation and an ignoramus lacking the necessary knowledge. On the contrary, the Latin record credits Pau Christià with an overwhelming victory over Nahmanides, who fled in the face of scorn. Nevertheless, the victory cannot have been so overwhelming if the friars attempted to punish Nahmanides’s alleged blasphemy and redaction of the booklet. Their action betrays not only a certain reluctance to allow a more determinate opposition to Nahmanides and his arguments but also the higher level of importance the disputation held for the Christians.<sup>60</sup> As far as I can see, the situation seems to be more complex. The friars were trying to find out whether the Talmud and other Jewish writings could confirm the mes-

57. An official document from the Royal Archive states that Jaume I granted Nahmanides 300 gold solidi for his expenses.

58. In 1266, the friars requested Pope Clement IV’s aid to deal with this man who had written a book filled with lies. He had engaged in a disputation with the pious friar Pau Christià and his book had been widely copied and distributed. A papal bulla was issued to reprimand him for his impudence, but it had no effect as Nahmanides had already settled in Eretz Israel.

59. See HAMES, “Fear God”, p. 9–14, and SKLARZ, ‘Nahmanides’ Torah commentary’. Sklarz underlines that Nahmanides made some additions to his commentary on the Pentateuch to describe the relationship of Abraham with Nimrod and that of Moses with the pharaoh in terms that evoke his relationship with King Jaume I.

60. SZPIECH (*From testimonia*) adopts a more nuanced perspective. In his view, the controversy began as a missionary endeavor, but was eventually deployed *ad intra*, for disciplinary reasons, within the Church.



sianic status of Jesus. This idea was an improvement on N. Donin's demand, in the first Disputation of Paris, that the Talmud be burned *sic et simpliciter* because it was a blasphemous work. The idea was put into practice by choosing Naḥmanides as the Jewish speaker. We might wonder whether this choice stemmed from previous knowledge of Naḥmanides's thoughts on the haggadic material.

Another issue involving restraint in the Hebrew text is that of authority. Pau Christià used Genesis 49:10 to deny Naḥmanides the title of *rav* ("Maistre"). In fact, the Jewish people would have lost any kind of political authority after the death of Jesus. Since the subsequent loss of rabbinical ordination (*semikā*), Jews have lost any authority (*memšallā*). According to M. Žonca,<sup>61</sup> Pau Christià claimed that the rabbinical authorities of his age no longer possessed legitimate power, as they concealed the messianic status of Jesus from the other Jews.<sup>62</sup> In the Hebrew text, Naḥmanides avoids the question, albeit ironically admitting to not being a *rav* or *Maistre*.

Naḥmanides experienced a sense of unease when Pau Christià employed certain haggadic passages to demonstrate that the Messiah had already arrived. Naḥmanides emphasizes twice in the *Vikkuaḥ* that he does not trust in the Haggadot involved. He attempts to explain his point of view based on the binding value of the Bible and the Talmud, and the free acceptance of the Midrashim. Some scholars believe such an argument to be so weak as to possibly signal Naḥmanides's ultimate failure. He would have been compelled to deny the fundamental significance of the Haggadah, which would have had an impact on his exegetic approach. His orthodox views on the Messiah and the Haggadah would have been challenged. From my perspective, a thorough examination of Naḥmanides's arguments yields a more nuanced conclusion: it appears that, during the heated exchange of views, Naḥmanides denied that the Haggadah had any binding significance.<sup>63</sup> In the *Vikkuaḥ*, he attempts to refine his argument. He accepted or rejected the value of a haggadic passage based on whether or not it contradicted another, as in the case of the two stories concerning the birth of the Messiah. He emphasizes that haggadic tales are inferior to the rabbinic teachings or can be surpassed by a kabbalistic

61. ŽONCA, 'Apostasy'.

62. Pau Christià used this line of reasoning in the second Disputation of Paris (1270) to consider Judaism to be a kind of heresy.

63. This stance led Pau Christià to accuse him of being a heretic.



interpretation. The Hebrew text seems to conceal the difficulties Pau Christià's arguments posed Nahmanides; in that sense, we can speak of reticence. Nevertheless, Nahmanides was able to provide his readers with an answer to the new missionary argument and offer an organic picture of his conception of Jewish history and his messianic expectations.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

At the end of this analysis, we are faced with the most problematic question: is the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* a trustworthy account of the facts, or merely a work of propaganda and, thus – in today's language – a kind of “fiction”? I would suggest, always referring to Clines's work, defining it as “fact-ion”, i.e. a literary genre in which historical fact and fiction are strictly mixed. The blending of historical facts and imaginative reconstructions is a peculiarity of medieval literature, in which the boundaries between history and fiction are rather blurred. One example of this is the famous Latin autobiography of Hermann the Jew.<sup>65</sup> The author of this text, which was probably written in Germany during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, used memories of the conversion of some Jews to celebrate the new monastic order and to call on his readers to convert, through dreams, narrative strategies and theological topoi. The same is true of the historical narratives in medieval Hebrew prose, as E. Yassif<sup>66</sup> has aptly noted. Through such narratives, the writer could shape the cultural memory of the Jewish people and express his concerns and communal anxieties. Could we read the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* in such a way? This work is neither “a recorded” tape nor a stenographic report – to use I. Loeb's words – of the disputation. It follows its own agenda, just as the Latin protocols did.<sup>67</sup> Nahmanides's *Vikkuaḥ* undoubtedly preserves the memory of the debated *auctoritates*, of his arguments with Pau Christià, and of his interpretations,

64. CAPUTO, *Nahmanides*, p. 176–179. See also BIANCHI, “Ecco”, on Nahmanides's interpretation of Isaiah 53.

65. SCHMITT, *La conversione*, p. 240–244.

66. YASSIF, *The Hebrew folktale*, p. 267; idem, 2002, p. 287.

67. On the problems of Latin protocols, see BIANCHI, *La “Disputa di Barcellona”*, p. 27–28. While the Latin protocols systematically seek to discredit Nahmanides and his interpretation, they mention Pau Christià just twice: once at the beginning of the account and once in relation to a preliminary meeting in Girona with Nahmanides.

but his reflection on the event reveals highly literary and theological elaboration. Because of this, the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* can today be read on several levels.<sup>68</sup> First and foremost, it tells the story of an encounter according to all the medieval categories (the description of the court, the king's behavior, and so on); at the same time, it is also Nahmanides's apology for all the doubts and worries he caused other Jews with his words and behavior, especially regarding the status of the Haggadah and the coming of the Messiah. Furthermore, it serves as a handbook that gives the Jewish communities of Spain, Provence and France a series of answers that they can use against Dominican missionary endeavors and apostates such as Pau Christià. Last but not least, the *Vikkuaḥ Ha-Ramban* offers an answer to the Dominican point of view expressed by the Latin protocol, which claimed complete victory for Pau Christià over Nahmanides and the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the latter. Although the Disputation of Barcelona quickly became a paradigmatic example of missionary fervor towards the Jews, the ominous silence of Ramon Llull on this event is noteworthy. A. Bonner<sup>69</sup> noted that the disputation took place in 1263, just when Llull experienced a profound conversion and began to make great efforts to evangelize Muslims and Jews. That silence was a decisive rejection of the missionary strategy of the Dominicans with whom he was in contact, which was based on the word of the *auctoritates* (see the allusion to Ramon Martí in the *Liber de Acquisitione*). His famous phrase "*Disputacion por auctoritates no ha repos*" underlines his skepticism towards R. Martí's obsession with the Talmud and its *testimonia*, paving the way for a different kind of missionary strategy that required unbelievers to acknowledge the glory of the Catholic faith.

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68. MACCOBY, *Judaism*, p. 74–75.

69. BONNER, 'L'apologètica', p. 178–180.

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