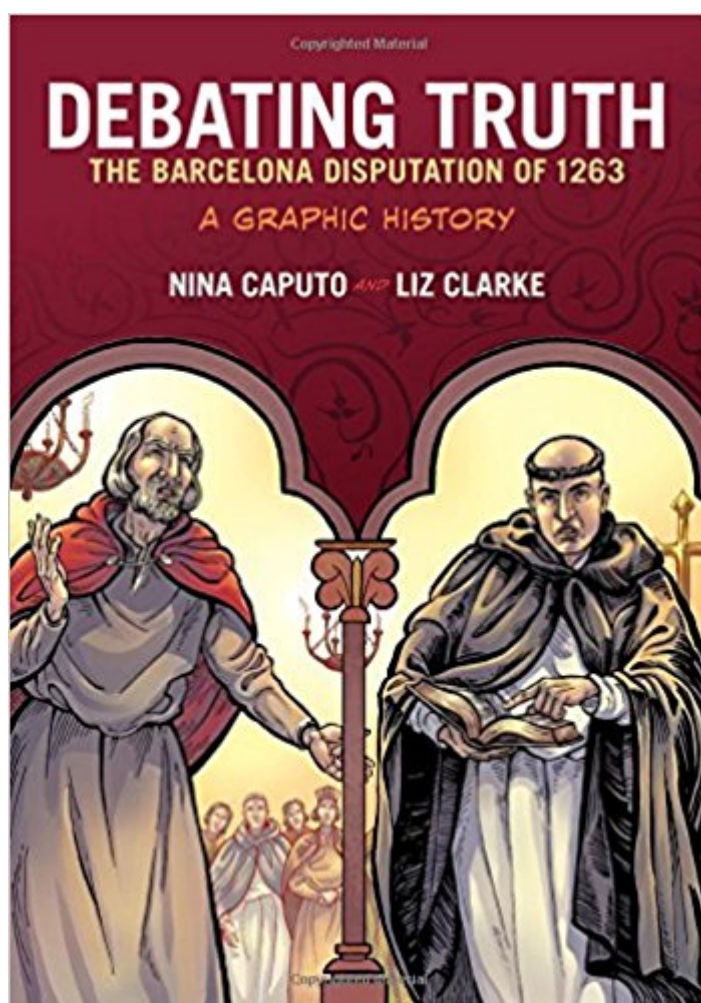


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Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation Of 1263, A Graphic History (Graphic History Series)



Synopsis

In the summer of 1263, Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, c. 1195-1270) traveled from his home in Girona to Barcelona at the behest of King James I of Aragon (1213-1276) to debate with a Dominican Friar named Paul about specific claims concerning the Messiah in Judaism and Christianity. The two disputants, each thoroughly convinced of the indisputable truth of his own religious faith and theological interpretations, argued their positions before a panel of judges headed by James I himself. Nina Caputo's new graphic history tells the story of the Barcelona Disputation from the perspective of Nahmanides. By combining the visual power of graphics with primary sources, contextualizing essays, historiography, and study questions, *Debating Truth* explores issues of the nature of truth, interfaith relations, and the complicated dynamics between Christians and Jews in the medieval Mediterranean.

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Customer Reviews

"Nina Caputo's marvelous reconstruction of the Barcelona Disputation is much more than a traditional narrative history. It is a laboratory permitting her readers to sift and weigh the evidence for themselves. She presents the dossier of primary sources that past historians have drawn from and their range of conclusions; but even more valuably, she lets us into the historian's workspace, allowing us to use the tools that she and Liz Clarke have assembled for the occasion, inviting us to share in the uncertainties, lacunae, and forking paths of which real historical interpretation is made. Too often when reading history books we passively consume narrative information about the past.

This book invites readers to participate actively in rethinking it."--Marina Rustow, Khedouri A. Zilkha Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Near East and Professor of History, Princeton University "It is a rare treat to encounter a work of such historical, and aesthetic, probity. Erudite, thoughtful, and imaginative, Nina Caputo has put together and created a new and searching range of documents with which to read and reconstruct the 1263 Barcelona Disputation--a major event in the old asymmetric conflict that opposed Christians to Jews and to Muslims. Debating Truth is an exemplary perspectival account of the characters and plots, the broad contexts and settings, and the meanings and aftermaths of this layered contest. Attentive to law, culture, religion, and politics--and to narrative and interpretation--Caputo and Clarke have produced a striking book, a visual and intellectual feat that demonstrates that there is indeed much to debate still about truth and representation."--Gil Anidjar, author of 'Our Place in al-Andalus': Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters "Debating Truth treats a timeless subject in a new way. How should believers in different faiths dispute the convictions that divide them? The Barcelona Disputation provides a famous medieval example of that question, now made available in a graphically novel and compelling way."--David Nirenberg, author of Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today "A visual delight and a narrative tour de force, Debating Truth uses the conventions of the graphic novel to unearth an authentic sense of the drama and danger that infused Christian-Jewish relations in the Middle Ages. In tandem with the source collection and Caputo's historical overview, it provides both an engaging and lucid introduction to medieval Spain and a chance for students and scholars alike to meditate on how we remember the past and how we tell our stories about it."--Jay Rubenstein, University of Tennessee "As a hybrid graphic history and academic work, Nina Caputo's Debating Truth not only offers an attractive and engaging book for classroom use but opens up welcome perspectives on the Barcelona Disputation. The graphic form forces the reader to contemplate the many gaps left in Nahmanides' account and in the historical record more generally."--Jonathan Decter, Brandeis University

Nina Caputo is Associate Professor of History at the University of Florida. She is the author of Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, Messianism (2007), and coeditor, with Andrea Sterk, of Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity (2014). Liz Clarke is a professional illustrator based in Cape Town, South Africa.

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides), was one of the greatest sages in Jewish history. When

he was nearly 70 years old, he was placed in a difficult and somewhat untenable situation. Called to Barcelona, he had to defend his Jewish faith in a Catholic dominated country, summoned by a Catholic king who was raised by and had loyalty to Pope Innocent II. While he was given full reign to defend his faith, Nachmanides knew the reality was such that he could easily have won the battle, but lost the war. Which is precisely what occurred. Many English readers know of Nachmanides own account via the 1983 Charles Chavel translation of The disputation at Barcelona. In an interesting new book Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation of 1263, A Graphic History, author Nina Caputo (Associate Professor - Department of History at the University of Florida) has written not only an updated translation of Nachmanides account, but that of interlocutor also. More interestingly, the book provides a fascinating overview of the times and circumstances which lead to the disputation. As to A Graphic History, that refers to the first part of the book which uses about 70 pages of illustrations (superbly done by Liz Clarke) to provide a deeper narrative to the story. Caputo writes that while illustrations provide additional depth to the story, it comes with its own unique set of challenges; mainly as how the character is portrayed can change the nature of the story. One thing I noticed that amongst the many illustrations, Nahmanides is never pictured wearing a skullcap. That striking absence is not explained. The disputation of 1263 found Nahmanides summoned from his residence in Girona to Barcelona at the request of King James I of Aragon to debate with Paul, a Dominican Friar and lapsed Jew, regarding the Messiah in Judaism and Christianity. The debate was before a panel of judges lead by James. While James gave him liberty to speak as he wished, Nahmanides was understandably hindered by the concern of offending the Christians, and the serious repercussions that would bring. Caputo writes that disputation traces its roots as a philosophical form back to classic antiquity. Works by Plato and Aristotle use the dialogue form, as it is both pleasing and a compelling means of demonstrating the power and agility of a disciplined human intellect. As to the reason for the Barcelona disputation; members of the Dominican and Franciscan mendicant orders made extensive use of disputation in their campaigns to eradicate heresy. It's not ironic then that these same mendicant orders accused Nachmanides of blasphemy when he later wrote his account. The book notes that while disputations were often intended as a missionary tool, they were an overall failure. Many who converted during those times did so not due to theological issues or that the disputation arguments persuaded them. Rather they converted due to the fact that circumstances of Jewish life had become untenable. That is similar to the thesis of Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History (Princeton University Press, ISBN 978-0691004792), by Todd Endelman. In translating Friar Paul's account, Caputo astutely notes that while he and

Nahmanides agreed on the overall notion of the disputation, the two narratives told opposite stories. Nachmanides account showed that he had won the debate and left with a cash gift from the king. While Paul's account said that he was utterly defeated. Caputo also writes of scholars such as Heinrich Denifle who felt that Nachmanides account of the disputation was meant to mask the fact that he failed miserably in his task. Denifle also critiqued Heinrich Graetz in that he didn't take into other sources, or accept Friar Paul's interpretation of the Talmudic passages in question. It's incredulous on the part of Denifle to think that Friar Paul's poorly constructed Talmudic interpretations actually had merit. It's fair to say that when summoned to Barcelona and authorized to speak freely, Nachmanides clearly knew that it was a Hobson's choice and even if he did fail miserably in his task as Denifle thought, it's simply that it was not a level playing field. Denifle saw these disputations as similar to the Lincoln-Douglas debates. The reality is that it would be appropriate to switch James I to Kim Jong-un and Barcelona to Pyongyang, to understand the reality that Nachmanides faced. The milieu in which the disputations occurred shows the depth of the interfaith hostility that in the medieval Crown of Aragon. For the Jews, any disputation was an unwelcomed disruption that challenged the community's sense of place and security. But Caputo notes that conversely, the fact that these disputations were able to take place, showed a very high level of social and cultural integration of Jews in a Christian society. Caputo has created a work that is intellectually fascinating and visually stimulating. By using the text of the disputations as the background, this is a most interesting book that details the events that lead to summoning Nachmanides to Barcelona, the disputation, and his ultimate exile from Aragon.

I have very mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, I love the idea and the structure: a graphic novel approach to presenting the material, followed by translated primary sources, some short essays providing context, a discussion of the historiography, study questions, and a reading list. Wow! But there are two things that got in the way of my feeling it was entirely successful. One is the way that much of the graphic section is approached. The stories in graphic novels (of which I am a big fan) are driven by dialog. Yes, there is often some narration and panels of action that is being described in that narration, but they depend heavily on characters saying things to each other. The section that covers the Barcelona disputation itself does that, but other sections fall flat. In one, for example, a series of letters and edicts from King James I are chopped up into small bits, each of which appears in a panel superimposed over some vaguely related activity, such as Dominicans standing around holding books. The graphics seem utterly superfluous. Caputo made the choice --

the wrong one, I think -- to treat those particular primary sources as inviolable texts rather than finding a way to turn them into something more active, and conveying the information in a dialog form. Since she gave a translation of the original edicts in the primary source section, I don't see why she couldn't have taken some liberties with the format of the information in the graphic section. Students would still have been able to encounter the text on which she based the dialog. My other hesitation is about Part III and to a certain extent Part IV. Some of the material is great. I especially like the way she helps students to understand how medieval Spain is unlike the parts of Europe that are usually held up as normative. But there is too much in those sections that is just too complex and would go right over the head of my own students, at least those who aren't experience history majors. And those majors would probably find other parts too simplistic for them. In other words, I don't know that I found the text pitched consistently to the same audience. As a teacher, this book has given me some ideas for teaching, and I'm not sorry that I spent time reading it. (Oxford University Press sent me a free copy on spec; I didn't request it.) But I don't think I can assign it, which is too bad because this sort of approach to presenting history has a lot of potential.

great book.. brings to life a piece of history vital to understand the Historic clash between Rabbinic Judaism, and Medieval Christianity. Many Jewish Rabbi's still consider this clash to be relevant to how they relate to the Modern Christian Church. very insightful.

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