NAHMANIDES
in Medieval Catalonia

History, Community, & Messianism

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Introduction

This book examines medieval Jewish conceptions of history and messianic redemption in the writings of the Catalan rabbi, Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, or Ramban, ca. 1195–1270). A brilliant talmudic and biblical commentator and an early exponent of Kabbalah, Nahmanides was also a shrewd and well-regarded intermediary between the Jewish communities and the royal administration. He has long been the subject of intellectual histories set against the context of medieval Jewish inter- and intra-communal relations, and specifically the encounter between philosophy and mysticism. However, intensive focus on the fairly insular context of Jewish community dynamics and interpretive disputes allows for only a limited view of thirteenth-century Aragonese Jewish intellectual and cultural life. Jews played a significant role in the expansion of the Crown of Aragon during the thirteenth century. It comes as no surprise, then, that as members of this society, Jews actively contributed to, reacted to, and participated in broader Aragonese culture. There is a fairly sizable body of social history based on materials held in the royal archives examining Jewish-Christian relations in the medieval Crown of Aragon, especially in the increasingly important urban centers. The encounter between Jewish and Christian interpretations of history and redemption in the setting of late medieval Aragon, however, remains largely unexamined.

This study reads Nahmanides’ reflections on the contours of Judaism and conceptions of redemption as a negotiation with Catalan and, more generally, Aragonese culture and society. The broader cultural context adds a crucial dimension to an understanding of the forces that shaped his compositions and the expectations his audience may have held.

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when reading them. Nahmanides’ writings, from his biblical exegesis to his poems, letters, and specifically polemical works, presented a self-conscious interpretation of the shape and meaning of historical time and change. In large measure, this discourse actively confronted Christian views of history and scripture, sometimes embracing Christian forms, but at other times directly refuting them. This complex engagement with Christian understandings of the significance of continuity and community is also reflected in the interpretive or exegetical models Nahmanides presented to his reader. A concern with revealing messianic redemption as imminent is a recurring theme throughout his writings. His careful articulation of this argument in various works, cast as an exegesis of biblical texts and historical events, illustrates an effort to preserve a cohesive and commonly held understanding that Jewish, not Christian, worship and interpretation would ultimately pave the way to redemption. Nevertheless, the structure of his arguments, the literary forms they took, and the way he introduced and grouped prooftexts all reflect Nahmanides’ conception of Christian interpretations of Jewish history and scripture as both powerful and deeply problematic.

Nahmanides’ ambivalence about Christian interpretations of the common historical origins of Judaism and Christianity as well as the culture and history they shared in the diaspora is mirrored by a similar ambivalence on the part of modern scholars about how to represent and understand the historical context for the roles and treatment of Jews in the medieval Crown of Aragon. Until the middle of the fifteenth century, the Jews of medieval Iberia enjoyed a degree of social, cultural, and intellectual integration that was unparalleled in late medieval European Christendom. Iberian Jewry’s cultural and social ascent has been cast in scholarly and popular narratives either as a model of medieval tolerance or as a lesson in the dangers of Jewish comfort and acculturation in the diaspora. Both interpretations can be supported with substantial documentary evidence, but neither provides a thoroughly satisfying interpretation of how Jews in late medieval Iberia negotiated the difficult terrain of interfaith relations in a multi-faith society.

The first of these narrative models presents medieval Iberian Jews as nearly full participants in the public sphere, encountering legal discrimination or persecution primarily in times of political or economic pressure. Scholars who adopt this approach tend to view the history of Jews under Christian and Muslim rule as part of a cultural and social continuum.
Under Iberian Christian rule, Jewish communities enjoyed many benefits of royal protection and privilege, while individuals were entrusted with positions of significant influence and prestige. Christian Spain during the high middle ages was a diverse, multilingual society which contained significant minority populations of Jews and Muslims. As such, the public sphere, especially in urban centers, encouraged some measure of 'secular' culture—a culture in which close business and intellectual relationships could form across confessional lines. This interpretation focuses on the unique conditions of Iberian religious and political history that provided the necessary context for a thriving interfaith symbiosis, a true convivencia, to use Americo Castro’s evocative language.

The late medieval decline of Jewish communities in Iberia provides evidence for an equally dramatic and compelling if teleological interpretation. A mass uprising in 1391, spurred on by preachers who viewed the cultural and social permissiveness and the close ties between the crown and the Jewish communities as threatening to Iberian Christianity, resulted in the murder or forced conversion of nearly two-thirds of Spanish Jewry. The imposition of restrictions on Jewish religious and business practices followed, then nearly a century of concentrated persecution of Jewish communities, and finally the wholesale expulsion of Jewish communities from Christian Spain in 1492. This emphasis on the tragedy of late medieval Iberian Jewish history evaluates the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through the lens of the Inquisition. Modern critics assume that the relative comfort and ease of Jewish-Christian relations during this period blinded Jewish leaders to signs of inevitable decline that should have been obvious at the time. Because it focuses on the final chapter of Iberian Jewish history, this interpretation implicitly negates any positive or creative exchange between Jews and Christians during the high middle ages.

When analyzing the circumstances of medieval Iberian Jewish history and culture over the long term, whether constructed in heroic or tragic terms, scholars must account for a broad and complex assortment of causes and outcomes while using a relatively limited set of explanatory models. Circumscribing the temporal and/or geographic range of study provides one means of complicating and enriching both the terms used to describe the conditions of medieval Jewish life in Christian Spain and the explanatory mechanisms used to account for change. Though he belonged to an international Jewish diaspora, Nahmanides’ engagement with Jewish
Jewish communities in the Crown of Aragon remained largely self-governed and autonomous; Jews practiced a wide variety of occupations, ranging from agricultural production to high-stakes commerce. While some members of the intellectual and economic elites attained a measure of acculturation, Jewish forms of cultural expression—including exegesis, polemics, mysticism, as well as institutions of self-government—continued to thrive even into the fifteenth century. Nahmanides’ biography offers a compelling illustration of the techniques Catalan Jewry used in negotiating their role in and alienation from Christian society and culture. Nahmanides’ intellectual heritage bears the influence of the Talmud-centered tosaphist interpretations from Northern France, as well as the more philosophically inflected methods of Provençal commentators. This confluence of methods, the instinct toward compromise, is emblematic of Nahmanides’ approach to interpretation and leadership. He was a prolific writer on a wide array of topics who employed innovative narrative and exegetical methods and had a great faculty for finding the common ground between diverse opinions and interpretations. His works of biblical exegesis and halakhah (interpretation of Jewish law) gained almost immediate recognition and acclaim. Moreover, Nahmanides distinguished himself as a capable leader and representative of his community during two public disputes, each of which was publicized far beyond the confines of his immediate community. Both the controversy over Maimonides’ writings in 1232 and the Barcelona disputation of 1263 are known to historians through texts written by Nahmanides which were copied and continued to circulate long after his death. His wide readership indicates that he mastered a manner of literary presentation that appealed to a diverse audience.

Precisely the qualities and achievements that distinguished Nahmanides as an extraordinary man and scholar make his writings a particularly valuable source for addressing issues of medieval Jewish identity building and historical consciousness. While he was a respected teacher and authority on Talmud and Torah revered throughout the Jewish diaspora, Nahmanides also maintained a relationship with the Catholic clergy of Girona and with such temporal authorities as the king of the Crown of Aragon. One might suggest that cordial relations with Christian authorities during a time of political subjugation indicate solely that as a rabbi of traditions and texts and his negotiation with Christian traditions, culture, and politics were informed by his daily life in the Crown of Aragon.
a fairly sizable community, Nahmanides allowed himself to get only as close to Christian culture as was necessary to protect the rights and privileges of his community. Yet, the way he conducted himself as a public figure, the views of history and creation espoused in his biblical exegesis, his strong emphasis on the promise of the messianic redemption suggest that his relationship with Christian culture was deeper and more complex than that. Nahmanides’ approach to *halakhah*, exegesis, and community leadership has at times an almost catholic feel to it. I do not suggest that Nahmanides, or for that matter the majority of his contemporaries, accepted Christian dogma, nor that he embodied a modern standard of tolerance for different beliefs and points of view. But to the degree that Nahmanides found some of the fundamental tenets of Christianity unappealing, this distaste was the product of an intimate knowledge and understanding of Christian doctrine and belief that grew out of his deep commitment to the place of Jews in that culture.

Other scholars have noted Nahmanides’ familiarity with Christian modes of interpretation. Amos Funkenstein and Gershom Scholem both drew attention to echoes of Christian exegetical methods and theology in Nahmanides’ biblical exegesis. Most dramatically, Christian influence in Nahmanides’ writing is clearly evident in his use of typological interpretations of the creation story. Moreover, as Funkenstein argues, it is clear that Nahmanides used typologies with a full recognition that typological exegesis was favored by Christian exegetes, who mobilized such readings at times in the service of anti-Jewish polemics. Nahmanides employed typologies only with caution and was careful to limit his typological interpretations to verses for which Christian readings in that vein were not common. It seems likely, therefore, that he was aware that his engagement with Christian thought and culture ran quite deep. Moreover, the technical terminology Nahmanides used to explain his typological interpretations appears to be a direct translation of Christian exegetical terminology into Hebrew. But while the echo of discussions with Christian scholars registered in Nahmanides’ biblical exegesis, there has been little scholarly effort devoted to examining how his engagement with Christian interpretive methods corresponded with the way he presented himself as a leader within the Jewish community and in exchanges with Christians. Indeed, there has been a tendency in recent scholarship to presume an impermeable divide between his public persona, most clearly illustrated by his participation in and account of the Barcelona disputation, and his “true”
beliefs, carefully guarded in his exegesis. By focusing on the attention Nahmanides paid to the dynamics of history, community, and the place of Jews and Judaism in the diaspora, this study will bring Nahmanides’ leadership, his exegetical works, and his engagement with Christian society into a single line of focus.

One of the features of Nahmanides’ exegesis is a consistent effort to examine and analyze how historical change transformed Jewish culture and ritual. He demonstrated a similar interest in the tension between continuity and change and its impact on Jewish ritual and interpretation throughout his writings from his exegesis to his account of the Barcelona disputation. This study traces Nahmanides’ conceptualization of the time in which he lived as a singular historical period in the unfolding story of human history. I use an analysis of his interpretations and perceptions of change in time to illustrate his understanding of Jewish cultural uniqueness and exclusiveness. Nahmanides’ attempt to wrestle with the meaning and significance of historical change and the linear and limited structure of time provided a common thread linking his interpretations of scripture and halakhah, exile and redemption, the uniqueness of Jewish history, and the way Jews were expected to conduct themselves vis-à-vis both Jews and non-Jews. His interpretation of local and historical changes was shaped, in part, by his understanding of the relationship between God and the Jewish people. This conception of historical and cosmic time provides the interpretive framework he used to reconcile contemporary events with his broad view of history as a process which, in his view, started at a definite and identifiable point in time (i.e., creation), and was wending its way to a conclusion (messianic redemption). In this sense, the political and cultural setting in which he lived helped shape his formulation of an interpretive method and model of leadership.

Jewish Life and Culture in the Crown of Aragon

The region of Catalonia was both prosperous and cosmopolitan during the middle ages. This was due, in part, to the proximity of such cities as Barcelona (the capital of Catalonia) and Girona to the Pyrenees in the north and the Mediterranean on the east. Geographically, politically, and culturally, Catalonia was a medieval crossroads: between Christianity and Islam, between France and Spain, and between the unified Crown of Ara-
Introduction

gon and the independent principalities and counties that were joined under the Crown. As a result of the conquest of Majorca under James I, trade in such items as silks, spices, grain, cotton, weapons, and dyes increased substantially by the middle of the thirteenth century, laying the foundation for a complex credit economy. The Jewish population of Aragon was integral to this economic boom, first as interested merchants and financiers of the military conquest of Majorca, and later joining the ranks of creditors and moneychangers and communities integral to the ‘repopulation’ of formerly Muslim territories.

In addition to the native Jewish population in the Crown of Aragon, visiting Jewish traders and immigrants from northern Europe, southern Spain, and North Africa also made a mark on the dynamics of the local culture, economy, and politics. Taking advantage of the linguistic and mercantile skills for which the Jews of North Africa were known, King James I circulated a letter in 1247 inviting Jews to settle in Catalonia, Valencia, and Majorca. The Crown of Aragon nearly doubled in size by 1250 with the successful conquest of Majorca and Valencia, incorporating a considerable Muslim minority into the Crown’s population. The influx of diverse linguistic and religious populations into the Crown is indicative of the conditions in Aragon and Catalonia which fostered creative and vibrant minority cultures during the middle ages throughout the region. The Crown of Aragon was a confederation of independent counties united under a single kingdom. Due to the diverse nature of this union, as well as a strong local nobility, it was in the best interest of the kings to facilitate a significant measure of local distinctiveness and autonomy in the various districts. In the case of Barcelona, for example, King James established a policy that preserved a balance between royal domination and local self-rule. In effect, this meant that the king appointed (or permitted the community to elect) native representatives who served as intermediaries between the urban population and the Crown. The degree to which the Crown controlled or interfered in local administration varied from king to king and county to county. Local traditions of government, education, methods of trade and taxation were permitted to continue and flourish under this system, provided that all obligations to the royal fisc and to the Crown in general were met in a satisfactory manner.

A similar system of local autonomy had also been in effect among the Jews of the region at least since the twelfth century. Jewish communities in the Crown of Aragon were independent and self-governed.

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status was granted either by the king or by the local ruling nobility under local charters which spelled out the conditions of Jewish autonomy. Each community, or *aljama*, was governed by a local body of elected officials, referred to in the Hebrew documents as *berurim*. The political and demographic character of each community was locally determined, thus election processes, the number of officials elected, the roles allotted to them, and the titles of elected officials varied from one *aljama* to the next. Those who participated in an election, whether as candidates or as voters, were frequently required to pay a minimum tax. It is clear, however, that the process of election was seldom egalitarian in a strict sense, at least not before the late thirteenth century. Practical administrative power—specifically, control of revenue and institutions fundamental to Jewish ritual, such as the slaughterhouse or burial grounds, and decisions permitting individuals to travel, engage in certain businesses, or enter as a new member of the community—rested in the hands of the wealthiest local families. In most cases only the most affluent families participated in community elections.

Since each *aljama* ran according to its own guidelines, it is very difficult to arrive at a general reconstruction of the methods and mechanisms of *aljama* government. The effort is further complicated by the fact that Hebrew documents dealing with the structure of *aljamas* before the second half of the thirteenth century are few and far between. However, it is possible to discern the extent to which *aljamas* were truly self-governing by examining the royal documents that discuss Jews and Judaism. During the time of King James I *aljamas* were permitted significant freedom. The only practical matters of Jewish community administration with which King James was officially concerned were the collection of taxes to the royal *fi sc* and overseeing elections of judges (*dayyanim*) and *berurim*. Leadership positions on local *aljamas* remained under the control of a small number of elite families—such as the Alconstantini family of Saragossa—until the turn of the fourteenth century. It was virtually impossible for Jewish leaders to prevent temporal rulers from interfering in the administration of Jewish communities. However, like their social and scholarly equivalents throughout the Jewish diaspora, leaders of the *aljamas* vigorously protected their local autonomy against challenges or incursions from leaders of distant Jewish communities. The freedom of local Jewish leaders to define the parameters of proper social conduct, ritual practice, and protocols for education and interpretation to meet the immediate needs of their distinct communities was
tremendously important for the preservation of tradition and stable leadership. The rabbinic tradition represented in the Talmud also endorsed political and cultural independence. Talmudic support for the validation of local difference can be found in the form of legal precedent and example in addition to talmudic discussion. As the first chapter in this study illustrates, tradition and practice generally held that the democratic principle of majority rule applied in betei din (courts of law). The same principle directed application of ordinances regulating public behavior, such as business practices: if the majority of the population could not comply with the rule of law without hardship, then that law could not be mandated. According to one frequently cited formula, “it is forbidden to declare a ruling on the population unless the majority of the population is able to abide by it.” Hence, no rabbi or group of rabbis could hold members of another community to a ruling without the consent of the leadership of the community receiving the instruction.

Local Jewish cultures developed in conjunction with the economic, political, and cultural climate in which they settled. Jewish community governments expected that Jews would automatically turn to the aljama for administration of legal claims and disputes, yet municipal and royal archives in the Crown of Aragon hold substantial evidence that Aragonese Jewry also sought protection in royal courts. Business agreements and wills, for example, composed in Latin and copied in Hebrew point to a fairly intricate set of links between Jewish and Christian political cultures at the ground level. The rising notarial class in the Crown of Aragon provided an alternative to the Jewish community scribe (sofer). By the thirteenth century, institutions of the aljama required that all business and legal transactions cohere to rabbinic law. In the case of wills, this meant that the conditions under which one might record a last will and testament were clearly delineated by talmudic tradition: rabbinic law demands that all testators be in good heath and standing when dividing property and that the bequeathal follow a line of succession in keeping with biblical traditions of inheritance. While all legal documents held sway in royal courts regardless of which authorities composed them or in which language they were written, royal notaries placed none of the limitations of rabbinic law on the distribution of property. The fact that a significant number of Jews chose notaries employed in the royal courts to record their final testaments indicates that neither the taboo on appealing to gentile courts, nor the Christian affiliation of the notaries marked the public sphere as foreign or dangerous for many Catalonian Jews.
The conditions necessary for maintaining active Jewish life in the diaspora varied widely from one settlement to the next. Jewish leaders were challenged to reconcile *halakah* with diverse cultural and social demands while also attending to the integrity of rabbinic practice. One benchmark of valid legal precedent was the degree to which it was culturally, socially, or economically practicable. For example, Gershom ben Judah ha-Golah, the great tenth- and eleventh-century halakhist and teacher, forbade the practice of polygyny among the Jews under his jurisdiction. While other rabbis in the western European diaspora adopted the same restriction, the ruling, which conformed to a principle of Christian mores, was not intended to be binding on communities in Islamic lands, where polygyny remained an accepted, even common practice. Negotiations between local cultural specificity and notions of universal Jewish norms were not always resolved without aftershocks of contention. The dispute that erupted in 1232 over Maimonides’ hermeneutics, for example, also represented a move towards conventional reform; however, this encounter between two distinct norms of behavior and practice escalated into a clash over the jurisdictional boundaries of a *herem*, or ban of excommunication. The conflict was resolved after a *herem* that was intended as a universal prohibition on some of Maimonides’ writing was revoked in part because several communities refused to recognize the universal ban as authoritative outside of the issuing community.

Within the Jewish communities (*kehilla*, sing., *kehilot*, pl., meaning a group of Jews who shared the same local custom, law, and place of worship), *halakah* dictated the order and rhythm of life. In practical terms, many of the responsibilities for maintaining stability and continuity in Jewish society fell to the elected community officials (*berurim*, *dayyanim*, etc.). However, the authority to interpret *halakah*, to oversee ritually permissible slaughter of meat, or to adjudicate in legal claims such as capital disputes or divorce proceedings, required a certain expertise in rabbinic law. Leaders or representatives of the *aljama* often arrived at positions of authority after having attained some success in trade or through associations with powerful members of the Christian community. In contrast, great scholars generally rose to prominence by gathering a following of disciples, by demonstrating their mastery of the rabbinic sources, and by showing good judgment when offering counsel in matters of *halakah* and community politics. During the thirteenth century halakhic proficiency was also the domain of the upper class. Advanced tutelage with a renowned scholar or rabbi was a luxury afforded primarily to those who
could pay the tuition or, if the scholar was generous with his time, to those whose families had sufficient enough means that the lack of a laboring body would not prove burdensome.  

Until the end of the thirteenth century, the title ‘rabbi’ was largely an honorific designation, not a vocational one. Though the sources refer to Nahmanides as the rabbi of Girona, this does not mean that his vocation was the performance of Shabbat services, nor did he receive official ordination from an established board of authorities. Like many other prominent scholars in the Crown of Aragon, Nahmanides was a local scholar whose reputation as a talented teacher, a skilled exegete, and a talmudist was known throughout the Jewish communities in the Crown of Aragon, and in much of the Jewish diaspora as well. His role was to teach and propagate a distinct scholarly tradition. Although there were no official duties attached to the title of rabbi, it was not uncommon for the community leadership or temporal authorities to request a great scholar to act in some official capacity. Nahmanides’ leadership skills were tested on at least two significant occasions. In the first instance, he asserted himself in the controversy over Maimonides’ philosophical writings (1232). His position in this dispute was a strong endorsement of the autonomy of local Jewish government and halakhic interpretation. Three decades later he represented his community in the Barcelona disputation (1263). In this case his actions appear to have been motivated both by obligation to the king and by responsibility to his community.

Nahmanides’ practical brand of leadership driven by intensive scholarship was emblematic of the type of Jewish culture that flourished in the northern principality of Catalonia. The political aptitude he exhibited during the controversy over Maimonides’ writings and the Barcelona disputation reflects an ability to move with fluidity between very different modes of decorum and to engage in meaningful, courteous, and successful dialogue with diverse authorities. In both instances, he was able to employ a variety of different rhetorical methods, depending upon which was appropriate for the audience addressed.

**Community, History, and Messianic Expectation**

This book examines the modes of expression, types of arguments, and exchange between innovation and tradition in Nahmanides’ writings. It follows Nahmanides’ discourse, beginning with works that largely address
the dynamics of and issues internal to the Jewish community, and then moves towards works that reflect his engagement with the more diverse culture of Catalonia. Works such as Nahmanides’ letters concerning the Maimonidean controversy and his commentary on Genesis reflect an inward focus relative to the Jewish community in which Jewish communities and Jewish practice were figured as fundamentally self-interested and self-sustaining. His account of the Barcelona disputation and Sefer ha-Geulah (The Book of Redemption) reveal a thinker wrapped up in an ongoing and multilateral exchange concerning the structure and meaning of history and redemption.

Jewish communities functioned as independent, autonomous entities, but they were also linked, whether as subjects of the same king or as communities that practiced the same traditions. Maintaining a balance between these conditions proved challenging at times. Chapter one examines the political and cultural dynamics that contributed to and were played out in the controversy over Maimonides’ writings. This chapter presents a set of questions about the methods available first to medieval Jews in general, and then to Nahmanides in particular, to establish interpretive authority beyond the local boundaries of the kehillah or a cluster of kehillot grouped within a single kingdom or political domain. To what degree was local Jewish government autonomous? What mechanisms were available for resolving interpretive disputes between disparate authorities? I argue that the instigators of this dispute, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham and his students, took Maimonides’ writings as their cause célèbre partially under the influence of the tense and contentious climate created by efforts to crush the Albigensian heresy during the same period in Languedoc.

A survey of documents extant from both sides of the controversy show that the vast array of opponents to Solomon ben Abraham’s campaign—including Nahmanides—matched the vigor, dedication, and desperation of Solomon ben Abraham’s call for a universal herem in their responses. A close examination of his letter to the French rabbis illustrates how Nahmanides’ conception of history informed the role he designated for himself as a leader within the Jewish community. As a distinguished scholar who occupied no official or elected position in the aljama or bet din (court), it was necessary for him to establish the basis of his authority elsewhere. He turned to prophecy. Biblical prophecy tells the story of politics (or leadership) with beautifully constructed rhetoric and poetry.

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Emulating the biblical prophets, frequently mobilizing their very words, Nahmanides addressed the circumstances of the Maimonidean controversy by fitting it into the context of the Jews’ ongoing struggle to negotiate with the conflicting historical circumstances of subjugation, on the one hand, and chosenness on the other. He used historical examples, poetry, and a demonstrated mastery of biblical and talmudic literature to sway the French rabbis from their dangerous convictions. A parallel between the course of action Nahmanides suggested to the French rabbis and the form and content of his argument also indicates that the letter was intended to serve as a theoretical and practical model for Jews in the diaspora.

Chapter two examines Nahmanides’ reading of creation. Throughout his biblical exegesis, Nahmanides demonstrated and advocated an integrated interpretive method making use of traditional interpretations as well as fresh, innovative approaches. This is most clearly the case in his commentary on Genesis. He understood the story of creation as a blueprint both for human history as a whole (including the covenant between God and the people of Israel) and for interpretive devices that might be applied to divine revelation in all its textual forms. As such, proper understanding of Genesis was, according to Nahmanides, vital to Jewish faith. Throughout his commentary on the book of Genesis, Nahmanides set out exegetical guidelines designed to unveil layers of meaning relevant specifically to the Jews of his time.

Questions of narrative sequence, authorial intent, and the timeliness of biblical interpretation concerned Nahmanides throughout his interpretation of Genesis. This chapter explores the introduction to Nahmanides’ biblical commentary, which provided a synthetic guide to some of the methods and concerns that drive his interpretation of the creation story and its relationship to human history, and the history of the people of Israel in particular. According to one layer of meaning Nahmanides identified in his introduction, the narrative of creation represented a plan for human history, which predated and prefigured creation and revelation. Rooting his interpretation in a body of accepted authorities, Nahmanides presented his innovations in understanding the time and sequence of creation as represented in Genesis as simple distillation of the widely accepted interpretations rendered by the most influential exeges in the Jewish past. Recognition of Moses’ authorship and his agency as storyteller are thus of fundamental significance to the interpretive method Nahmanides introduced in his biblical commentary.
Nahmanides complicated the beginning of creation and history by suggesting that both the law of Torah and the narrative of history pre-dated creation. However, his reading of biblical history presented the time of redemption as both immanent and certain. Nahmanides’ messianic prediction as presented in his biblical interpretation and elsewhere provided a model for interpretation and behavior which applied to all of the people of Israel. He understood the structure of the creation story—six days of work followed by a day of rest—as a prefiguration of the arrangement of human history: six one thousand year epochs, followed by a thousand year epoch of redemption. This interpretation was built upon a careful consideration of the relationship between God’s work and the biblical description of this creative process. He concluded that the description of creation, like prophecy, represented a covenant between God and the people of Israel such that the events, patterns, and consequences have meaning beyond the narrative that contained them. Using this interpretive structure, Nahmanides revealed to his reader a precise time frame for the messianic advent, one that he claimed had simply been concealed in the biblical narrative.

Nahmanides also projected an exact time frame for the arrival of the Jewish messiah in his disputation account, though the continuities between these texts have received little attention. Here I argue that the messianic expectation Nahmanides outlined in the disputation account was more than a mere trope employed for dramatic effect. Instead, he articulated an organized hermeneutic method which viewed prophecy in the Hebrew Bible as timebound and directed exclusively to the Jewish people. The documentary evidence remaining from the disputation agrees that the discussion revolved around the time of messianic redemption. A good part of this debate, according to the Hebrew account, focused on the conversion of biblical prophetic hints concerning the time of redemption into a time frame that fit with historical events. Nahmanides’ account of the event draws attention to symbolic renderings of temporal phrases, such as day, week, and hour, in prophecy.

Chapter three turns from Nahmanides’ conversation with Jewish authorities and traditions to his involvement in an exchange with and about Christians and apostates. The well-documented Barcelona disputation of 1263 allows an important view of Nahmanides’ facility with the traditions and beliefs of Christianity as well as his ability to navigate the complexities of court culture and patronage in the Crown of Aragon. Both the event of
the disputation and its textual records have received significant attention in modern scholarship; however, this chapter poses some new questions to Nahmanides’ Hebrew disputation account. I make the case for a fresh understanding of the intersection between Jewish and Christian elite culture in Catalonia, including aesthetic values as applied to literary forms and interpretive structures.

King James I of Aragon compelled Nahmanides to participate in a public disputation in which he was expected to defend the Jews’ continued messianic expectation in a debate with Friar Paul, a recent convert to Christianity. Accounts of the Barcelona disputation are preserved in two contemporary documents: the first is a Hebrew account written by Nahmanides, and the second an anonymous Latin report. Each offers a highly self-interested representation of the event. Two years following the disputation some of Nahmanides’ Dominican adversaries charged him with circulating a false and blasphemous narrative of the disputation. A royal court convicted Nahmanides of these charges, and subsequently expelled him from the Crown of Aragon. A summary of the hearing remains in the royal archives in Barcelona. The first part of chapter three presents the narrative of the disputation and the remaining textual evidence. Because the Barcelona disputation has been so well documented in the secondary literature, this chapter also provides a critical survey of the issues and concerns that have been addressed in this scholarship. Focusing on the rhetorical structure and evidentiary claims employed in the considerable scholarship on this event, I suggest that the majority of the previous treatments of the Barcelona disputation and its significance have preserved, even replicated the adversarial tone of the documentary evidence. This discussion of secondary literature attempts to come to terms with why this particular set of events and texts has been so compelling as to occupy dozens of books and articles, not to mention a popular play and a BBC television production. As such, it lays the foundation for a fresh approach examining the narrative devices Nahmanides employed in recording the disputation and rhetorically linking this text with other works he wrote near the end of his life.

The remainder of this chapter examines the rhetoric Nahmanides employed in his treatment of apostates and Christians. I argue that the introductory paragraph of Nahmanides’ Hebrew disputation account provided an interpretive frame intended to guide his Jewish readers’ understanding of the events represented. This portion of the text includes a
provocative quotation from the Babylonian Talmud depicting the (fictional) trial and execution of several of Jesus’ apostles. Nahmanides encouraged his reader to make a clear distinction between apostates from Judaism and native Christians. Through an implicit equation between the apostles—who, according to this talmudic passage, were executed as idolaters—and recent Jewish converts to Christianity, he suggested that it is not contact with Christians per se that threatened the cohesion of Jewish life and culture in the diaspora, but rather the persistent intrusion of apostates into Jewish affairs, both individual and corporate.

Chapter four looks more closely at Nahmanides’ interpretive methods, especially in so far as they were directed at making sense of the nature of history and prophecy. I demonstrate here that Nahmanides’ understanding of the historical past, the dynamics of society in the present, and the promise of redemption in the future were built upon a methodical consideration of how to extract meaning from the historical and prophetic material contained in the Hebrew Bible. Nahmanides’ full-length treatise on redemption, Sefer ha-Geulah (The Book of Redemption) distinguished between prophecies already fulfilled and prophecies yet to be realized. This work made an important contribution to an apocalyptic discourse that flourished between the late thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries in the Crown of Aragon. Nahmanides argued that the time of redemption was in relatively near proximity, and that crucial information about the messianic era—including information about when it would begin—could be gleaned from a careful and disciplined reading of the Hebrew scriptures. His contribution to a rapidly expanding literature contemplating the imminence of the end-time reacted to aggressive Christian polemics, but his manner of response, the methods of interpretation he employed, had a reciprocal influence on his Christian interlocutors. A comparison between Sefer ha-Geulah and the works of the physician turned exegete, Arnau of Vilanova, demonstrates a process of cross-fertilization between Nahmanides and millenarian exegetes in the Crown of Aragon. In Sefer ha-Geulah Nahmanides used the same methods of analysis and arrived at the same conclusions as he did in his biblical commentary and the disputation account. In each of these works, he addressed the time frame of messianic expectation, the shape and duration of human history, and problems of interpreting divine revelation. Nahmanides’ end-time speculations represent just one example within a much larger body of work that belied the notion that the greatest rabbis of this period practiced a “purely Jewish” mode of interpretation.
Developing the argument already presented in previous chapters that Nahmanides’ Hebrew disputation account contains numerous interwoven layers of meaning, the final chapter of this book suggests that Nahmanides’ disputation account contributes to a body of literature written in the Catalan vernacular. Here I interrogate Nahmanides’ production of a narrative account of the disputation to determine the degree to which Jews participated in conventions of court society and literary patronage in the Crown of Aragon. A dramatic turn in Nahmanides’ account, in which the author introduced a term in the vernacular to clarify the meaning of a Hebrew phrase, provides the entry point. Nahmanides came under attack by the Dominicans for writing an account of the disputation and showing it to the bishop of Girona.

The scholarship on the Barcelona disputation has gone to great lengths to make sense of the feeling of threat that followed the circulation of Nahmanides’ account. There has been no parallel effort to take seriously Nahmanides’ defense against charges of blasphemy after the bishop of Girona requested that the rabbi produce a personal account of his debate with Friar Paul. Since no physical evidence of such a text remains, it is impossible to determine whether the extant Hebrew account was related to the text Nahmanides showed to the bishop. However, the existing Hebrew text does bear formal and stylistic similarities to other works that were written during this period in Catalan. This chapter argues that Nahmanides’ disputation account contributed to and participated in an important turn in the development of vernacular literary and narrative forms in the Crown of Aragon. The friars’ accusation that Nahmanides engaged in a literary dialogue with the bishop of Girona suggests that Jews of a certain position in society participated in an economy of cultural exchange that was both mutual and productive. The imbalance of power between Nahmanides and his patrons notwithstanding, the Hebrew record of the Barcelona disputation reflects cultural and aesthetic sensibilities that were shared by Catalonian Jews and Christians.