Isaac de Castellón: poet, kabbalist, communal combatant

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Abstract In the fourth decade of the thirteenth century a long-simmering revolt erupted in Barcelona and surrounding communities. It pitted the nesi'im (literally: princes), who claimed communal authority as an aristocratic prerogative and enforced it through their influence at the royal court, against a scholarly elite that included major figures such as Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi. The political conflict intertwined with two wider religious disputes: the Maimonidean controversy of the 1230s and the debate over the legitimacy of kabbalah. The rebels, who included kabbalists and opponents of philosophical rationalism gained the support of James I and thus prevailed. One figure mentioned as a leader of the revolt, “the poet Rabbi Isaac Castellón,” has until now remained obscure. The article identifies him with a poet of the same name, mentioned as the author of a liturgical poem included in the fourteenth-century Barcelona Haggadah. Close reading shows it to be skillfully wrought, and to make creative use of Andalusian poetic tradition and technique. Castellón transcribes the Neoplatonic contrast between God's hidden and revealed aspects into a kabbalistic key, using a kabbalistic symbol, “the tip of the yod,” for Keter, the highest sefirah. The conclusion of the poem appears to assert that, contrary to the claims of its critics, the kabbalistic doctrine of the sefirot is consistent with God’s absolute unity. The poem’s adoption as a prelude to the Shema’ in the communal service may have been a consequence of the victory of the Barcelona rebels.

In the fourth decade of the thirteenth century three historic conflicts intertwined in the Jewish community of Barcelona. One was political: a struggle for communal power that extended to adjacent communities as well.1 The other two were theological: the great controversy over Maimonidean rationalism that engulfed Jewish communities across Europe;2 and the dispute sparked (in Spain and Provence) by the quest of the newly emergent kabbalah for legitimacy and authority.3 These conflicts and their outcomes helped shape the future of Jewish communal and cultural life in Catalonia.

∗Elka Klein gave me the finest gift a student can give a teacher: she redeemed some of my early work from obscurity, defending, correcting, and broadening it, with her fine historical sense and mastery of the medieval Catalan archives. The results were integrated into the larger narrative of her Jews, Christian Society, and Royal Power in Medieval Barcelona, completed in her heroic last years. I marvel at her achievements and mourn their untimely end. This paper is about a shadowy figure who cropped up in our sources, piqued our curiosity, but eluded our grasp. It is a sad privilege to dedicate it to Elka’s memory.
The political conflict pitted the “princes” (nesi’im) of Barcelona, who claimed power as an aristocratic prerogative but held it through royal influence, against a prosperous and learned elite, who thought power the prerogative of pious scholars. The two parties had conflicting cultural allegiances. The nesi’im admired Maimonides’ rationalism and contemned kabbalah. Their opponents included talmudists, kabbalists, and critics of rationalism. So the political and cultural were entangled.

The nesi’im boasted distinguished forbears. The greatest, Sheshet Benveniste (d. ca. 1205), was prominent as a royal bailiff, diplomat, doctor, patron, and scholar. His defense of Maimonides (whom he took to deny physical resurrection) exhibits a fierce rationalistic spirituality and a thorough familiarity with Arabic sources. His son-in-law, Makhir b. Sheshet (d. 1226), was prominent as the royal bailiff of Barcelona and successfully resisted an earlier challenge to the nesi’im. But the nesi’im who confronted the rebellion of the 1230s are more obscure. Only two, Abraham and Judah ibn Ḥasdaï, are known by name. Both were staunch defenders of Maimonidean rationalism, and Abraham was an important intellectual; but it is unclear how engaged they were in the political struggle.

The rebels, on the other hand, included illustrious figures: Nahmanides, the greatest Jewish scholar of the century, Jonah Gerondi, an eminent pietist and talmudist, and Samuel ha-Sardi, the civil-law codifier. But one leader of the rebellion—“the poet, R. Isaac Castellón”—has remained elusive. No poet of that name is found in Zunz’s long list, Davidson’s still longer list, or the monumental history of Schirmann and Fleischer. In 1992 however, the Spanish scholar Carlos del Valle Rodriguez published a poem by “R. Isaac de Castellón.”

Zunz had seen the poem, but did not recognize כסטון as the Iberian toponym Castellón; so he emended it to “Capestan” and entered a non-existent “Isaac de Capestan” in his index of poets. Davidson listed an equally non-existent כסטון. Del Valle corrected their error, published the poem with a Spanish translation and notes, and analyzed its genre, technique, and literary qualities. I think we can say with confidence that its author is the very “poet, R Isaac Castellón” mentioned as a leader of the revolt. Del Valle assumed he was from Castellón de la Plana in Valencia. But in light of his role in the revolt, Castellón de Empuriás (northeast of Gerona) seems more likely. Isaac’s poem provides an interesting opening into his mind and is not unrelated to the revolt. But before turning to the poem, let us locate its author in the sources that bear on the revolt directly.

One is a partially-preserved letter that condemns the rebels as usurpers who “broke away from their masters” and established a communal organization of their own. It denounces one of the leaders of the revolt as a faithless