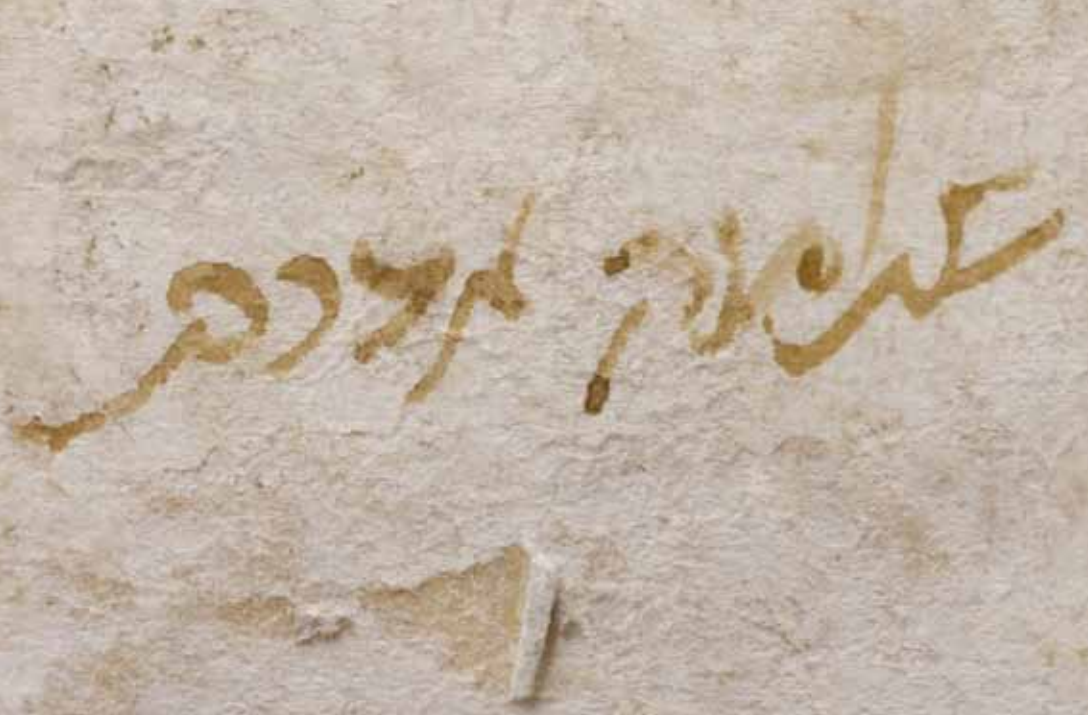


Salomon ben Adret

Barcelona 1235-1310

The Triumph of Orthodoxy



The delegates of the community of Rome crossed land and sea until they reached this great and illustrious city. A city perfect in its pure beauty, a metropolis of Israelites full of knowledge of the Torah, of good works, of generosity, of distinguished lineages, of riches and wares, Barcelona, a city of crowned splendour. And they went to the house of the eminent sage and head of our great men, Rabbi Solomon Adret.

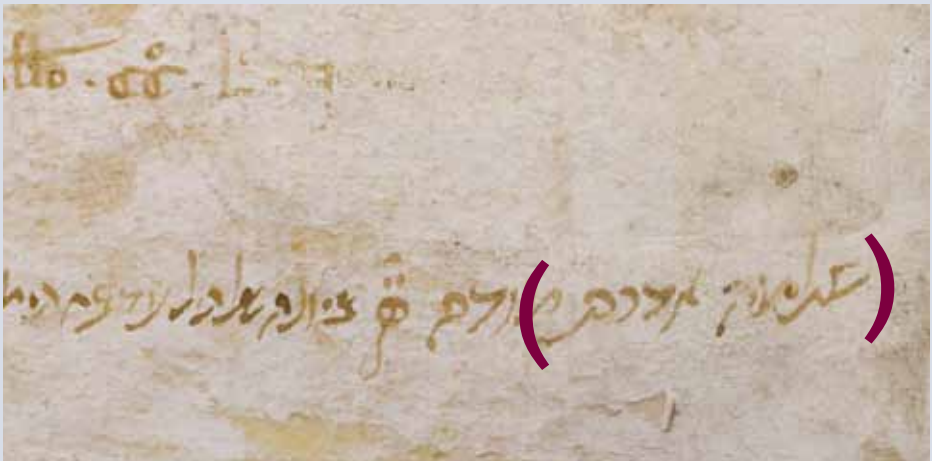
Jucef ben Içac ben Al-Raval from Huesca

Barcelona and Salomon ben Adret

Until the assault that heralded its fall in 1391, medieval Barcelona housed the largest Jewish community not only in Catalonia but in the entire Crown of Aragon. Barcelona's Jewish quarter produced several prominent figures in fields such as theology, philosophy, poetry and even kabbalah, but none of them attained the fame of **Solomon ben Adret of Barcelona** (1235-1310).

Leader of Catalan Judaism, a distinguished Talmudist authority and jurisconsult, Solomon Ben Adret, who died seven hundred years ago, became Rabbi of Barcelona and served three monarchs (Peter II, Alphonse II and James II) as Head of Jewish Affairs.

He was born during the reign of James I and he was a contemporary of Ramon Llull and Arnau de Vilanova. The Catalan-Aragonese monarchy was spreading at this time southwards and towards the Mediterranean. Ben Adret was fourteen when Barcelona, a city growing in terms of its commercial activity and number of inhabitants, attained self-government from the monarch with the formation of the Council of the Hundred. The organisation of this council would subsequently serve as a model for the institutions in the Jewish quarter or aljama that over the centuries had become established in Barcelona and that was in contact with other quarters located in other cities.



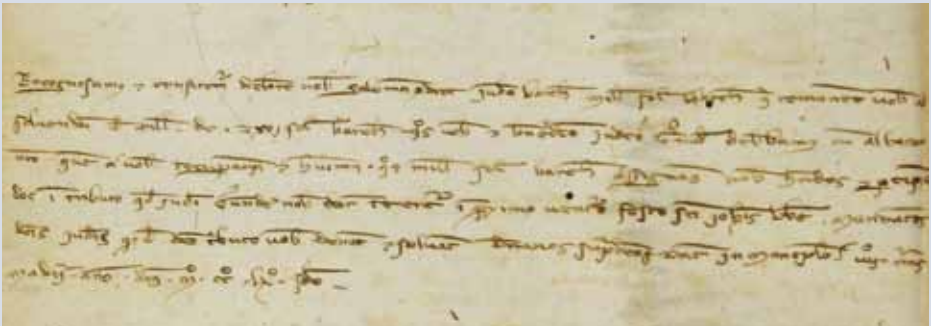
Solomon ben Adret's signature on a receipt dated 23 December 1259
Chapter Archive of Barcelona, 1-6-2815

From banker to rabbi

The son of a prosperous family of Barcelona's Jewish quarter, from an early age Solomon ben Adret devoted himself to the family business: money-lending. The Catalan count-kings, such as James I, were his debtors. Ben Adret soon stood out in religious studies, however.

He had as his teachers two great figures of 13th-century Catalan and European Judaism: Rabbi **Moses ben Nahman of Girona** (Nahmanides, 1194-1270) and the pietist rabbi **Yonah ben Abraham Gerundi** (1200-1263). Once his education as a Talmudist had been completed, Solomon ben Adret ceased to occupy himself with the family business.

Described as an enterprising person with a strong character and firm judgement, Ben Adret turned to the fields of rabbinic jurisprudence and the interpretation of the Talmud. He accepted the office of Rabbi of Barcelona, which he exercised for over forty years, founding his own Talmudic Academy. He possessed copies of the Talmud from the academies of Babylon and Kairawan, and his disciples included Jews from throughout Catalonia, Aragon, Castile, France and Germany.



James I acknowledges a debt incurred with Solomon ben Adret, a Jew from Barcelona, of 1,216 Barcelonan sous, and with Benedi, a Jew from Girona, of 1,000 sous, that the king deducts from the taxes that Jews in Girona must pay by the Feast of Saint John. (Montpellier, 4 May 1262)

Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Register of the Royal Chancellery, 12, f 50v



Seal of Nahmanides, 13th century
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Photograph of a replica conserved at the
Museum of Jewish History in Girona

The Talmud

The Talmud (a Hebrew word meaning “study” or “teaching”) is the great compendium of the often contradictory opinions and interpretations of famous and expert Jewish rabbis on matters of moral and religious conduct. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic, it is a compilation of jurisprudence and a gathering of exemplary legendary traditions, stories and anecdotes illustrating the theoretical and purely legal aspects of compliance with Judaism’s religious precepts. It has two components: the Mishnah (or first compendium of rabbinic Judaism’s juridical traditions addressed to interpreting and complying with the Torah), and the Gemara (a compilation of discussions and opinions drawn from the rabbis’ debates on the Mishnah).

Judaism considers the Torah to be the “written law”, while the Talmud is the “oral law” that expands upon it, supplements it and explains it and that, by definition, may never contradict it. There are two compilations: the Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Babli (the longest and most acknowledged one) and the Jerusalem Talmud (a partial version and only a reference work in the medieval academies as from the 13th century). The Talmud is also considered a holy book of Judaism and for centuries it has been the most important factor in the systematisation of Jewish customs and in the cohesion and union of the Jewish people around the world.



Man sat pointing at the word “wise”
Kaufmann Haggadah, Catalonia, 14th century
Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest

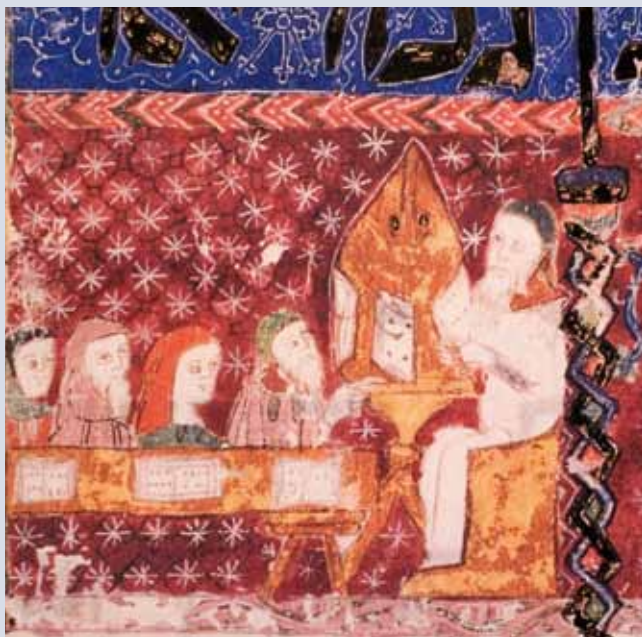
The *yeshivot* or Talmudic academies

The Talmud was studied at the so called *yeshivot* or Talmudic academies that were found in many Jewish communities. In medieval Catalonia, the most important ones were situated in Barcelona, Girona and Perpignan. The Talmudic academies were centred around a Talmudic master. There were usually about twenty-five students and they often came from other Jewish communities and sometimes from distant countries.

The duration of the studies varied, depending always on each individual student and his capacities, and it could be limited to a single year or a few months longer. The classes were usually held at the master's home but on some occasions the communities provided places where these studies could be carried out. The academies were often supported by donations from private persons and sometimes charitable donations went to finance the purchase of books and manuscript copies.



Rabi and pupils
Barcelona Haggadah, 14th century
The British Library



Rabi and pupils
Kaufmann Haggadah, Catalonia, 14th century
Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest



The *responsa*

Woe to him who knows not the difference between good and evil.

Talmud Babli, *Sanhedrin* 17b

Let a person always bend like a reed and not be hard like a cedar.

Talmud Babli, *Taanit* 16a

Resolving doubts

The Talmud's complex argumentations and its many interpretations gave rise to doubts among the Jewish faithful. In order to obtain a clear answer on a specific matter or question, private persons, rabbis and community councils addressed a wise master to have him clarify such doubts and issue rules of action. The opinions of the rabbis created a literary genre called *Sheelot u-Teshuvot* (literally, "questions and answers") in Hebrew and *responsa* (replies) in Latin.

The compendia of *responsa* contain the clarifications of doubts on personal or business ethics, on moral and social relations, on practical matters of jobs and trades, on household affairs and synagogal rituals, on customs and holidays, on expressions of joy or grief, and even on games. They also deal with more intellectual questions on the philosophy of religion, astronomy, mathematics, history, geography, the functioning of the directing bodies of the Jewish communities, the interpretation of Biblical passages and of the Mishnah, debates on the Talmud and the history of Judaism.

The *responsa* are also a valuable source of historical information on the Jews' everyday life and social and religious concerns at the time when they were written.





Source of questions

The approximately three thousand opinions of Solomon ben Adret on matters of religious jurisprudence were gathered by the communities that had made the respective queries. His opinions were characterised by the simplicity with which he interpreted complex aspects of the Torah and the Talmud, and they have been adduced for centuries as a sure way of clarifying matters relating to Jewish law.

The queries reached him in Barcelona from communities in many places of the Catalan-Aragonese Crown, such as Lleida, Perpignan, Tarragona, Castelló d'Empúries, Girona, Cervera, Valencia, Palma, Saragossa, Huesca and Monzón, from towns in Occitania such as Montpellier and Narbonne, as well as from Germany, France, Bohemia, Sicily, Crete, Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Portugal, Navarre and Castile. The sentences and clarifications of Solomon ben Adret were the main source of the book *Shulchan Aruch* by Yossef ben Ephraim Caro of Toledo (1499-1575), the last great codifier of Jewish law.

Master and pupil
Barcelona Haggadah, 14th
century

Responsa about the king's law

Question: *You have written me to ask that I make known to you my opinion on the case of some Israelites who have a quarter, at the end of which there is an entrance with a double door and a bolt. Near this entrance there is a passage that continues outside the quarter. Some ten Israelite families live on one side and the other of the passage. And since the end of the passage is open to the Christian quarter, the community solemnly resolved to build a gate in the middle of the passage according to a licence they have from the king. Some of those who live along the outside part of the passage were not present at that time when it was resolved to build an entrance there, and now they oppose the community's decision, arguing that inside the quarter stands the synagogue for the members of the community and the ritual bath for the purification of the women, and that when they want to enter they will not be able to do so. Do they have a right to challenge this decision?*

Answer: I am inclined to believe that they may challenge it according to the Talmudic laws. [...] In any case, it should be said that this is what the law stipulates or what would be the case in the land of Israel, where the principle which holds that “the law of the realm is also law for us”, as is stated by some French masters of blessed remembrance, does not apply, since the land of Israel is the inheritance which all of us, both the common people and the king, have received from our ancestors. But now that we live under the dominion of the nations, and squares and streets are the property of the kings, who may close or build in the streets of town, as we see that they do, if the king gave permission to those people of whom you speak to me to build some gates, it is necessary to act according to the principle that “the law of the realm is also law for us”.

[...] Thus, if the king ordered that an entrance with gates should be made in the middle of the quarter, he so ordered, making use of his authority, to protect the people. The principle that applies for the kings of Israel also applies for the other nations on this point, which demonstrates that this is a legitimate and not an arbitrary principle. Therefore, the king's

Salomon ben Adret, *Responsa*, II:134



The methodical regulation of everyday life

Aside from the compilation of his *responsa* on specific matters, Solomon ben Adret was also the author of commentaries on the Talmud and works of legal character that were aimed to create a systematised body of rules for different aspects of everyday life, such as eating, family life, the ritual bath, holidays and the functioning of the community:

Hiddushé Aggadot ha-Rashba ("Talmudic Commentaries of Rashba"), a compendium of commentaries on 18 tractates of the Talmud.

Torat ha-Bait ("The Law of the Home"), a handbook on Jewish food laws and other religious laws to be obeyed at home.

Mishméret ha-Bait ("Defence of the Home"), an invective against the book ***Bédeq ha-Bait*** ("Crack of the Home"), by Rabbi Aharon ben Jucef ha-Levi de Na Clara of Barcelona, which criticised *Torat ha-Bait*.

Shaar ha-Maim ("Gate of the Waters"), a book focused on the laws relating to the mikveh or Jewish ritual bath.

Avodat ha-Qodesh ("Worship of Holy God"), a handbook on the laws of the Sabbath and on the religious holidays of the Jewish calendar.

Piskeh Hallah ("Decisions on the Bread Offering"), a tractate on the laws relating to the ritual Sabbath bread.

Just like his *responsa*, these works by Ben Adret had a widespread impact and have appeared in numerous editions



Set of ceramic pieces used in daily life (plates, porringers, jugs and salt cellar) recovered from excavations of the Jewish quarter. 13th-14th centuries. Barcelona History Museum

Family sat around the table whilst, on the right hand side, the food is prepared. Kaufmann Haggadah, Catalonia, 14th century Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest



The guardian of orthodoxy

1. The Maimonidean controversy

As Rabbi of Barcelona, Solomon ben Adret made a fierce defence of the orthodox positions of the Jewish religion and rejected the excesses of rationalist Jews who were followers of works by Maimonides and other philosophical studies that allegorically interpreted many passages from the Scriptures. In this way, with Ben Adret, Barcelona became a reference point for Orthodox Judaism.

In the so called *Maimonidean polemic* between rationalists and traditionalists, Ben Adret took sides with the latter, firmly opposing the rationalism of Aristotelian roots of Maimonides' followers. Ben Adret advocated a Judaism based entirely on the traditional studies of the Bible and the Talmud, up to such a point that in 1305 he issued an **anathema** against the persons who dared to study "the Greek books", that is to say, philosophy, before reaching the age of twenty-five years.

This condemnation outraged the rationalist rabbis and those of a more progressivist spirit, such as **Menachem ben Solomon Meiri** of Perpignan (1249-1316) and the poet and Rabbi **Yedayah Penini** (ca. 1275-ca. 1340), who expressed their displeasure despite their great respect for Ben Adret, decidedly opposing the prohibition decreed in Barcelona. An external factor conditioned the polemic to the detriment of the renovators, who had a considerable following in Occitania: the year 1306 marked the first plundering and expulsion of Jews in the lands under the control of the French monarchy which, with the sale of their property, sought to alleviate the problems of the royal treasury. The community's survival increasingly became a matter of fundamental importance.

Orígens de la polèmica

In the town of Lunel near Montpellier, the translator Samuel ibn Tibon (1150-1230) finished the translation into Hebrew of Maimonides' book *The Guide for the Perplexed* in 1204. The new theology that was deduced from this book - seeking to harmonise the postulates of the Judaic faith with reason and with the ideas of Aristotelian philosophy - led to the outbreak of an intellectual confrontation between its supporters and its detractors: this was called the **Maimonidean Controversy**.

This theological debate came to acquire a great virulence in the Catalan-Occitan area and, within the communities, it took on tones of social confrontation: the Jewish upper classes - rich, cultivated and likewise given to the study of the secular sciences and philosophy - adhered with enthusiasm to Maimonides' rationalist theology, while the more popular classes defended a traditionalism firmly rooted in the classical studies of Judaism based solely on the Bible and the Talmud.

**On seeing the fire kindled, we feared that it would spread and find
briars to burn: that the men whose soul is empty of the Torah and
know nothing, would be set ablaze.**

Anathema of Barcelona, doc 2
Solomon ben Adret,

Anathema of Barcelona, 1305

[It is offensive to prefer the study of the sciences
to that of the Torah.]

Woe to those who outrage the Torah
And seek to distance themselves from it and
Remove the crown, and take away the tiara,
Now and then burning incense to Greeks and
Arabs.

[They have let themselves be seduced by the moral
of pleasure.]

Like Zimri before the community
They do great obscenity
By bringing the Midianite
Into the midst of the Israelite people.

[The Torah is the elder daughter who, with words
alluding to the story of Jacob's marriage, should
be given preference.]

They have judged the elder daughter with a
vile sentence
And have shown preference to the younger
daughter.

[They have become estranged from their own
religious tradition.]

Unrepentant, they behave like foreigners
And dance like satyrs in the streets;
They are so happy about what they have done
That they rush to show it to their sons.

[They must be prevented from removing the Torah
from its rightful place.]

So, seeing the fowler's trap
Set on the ground, and as before long
The dove will have to make its nest
Beside the gully, in a wild place,

[Things have gone too far and so they have
decided to take action.]

we have said, trembling:
The eruption has gone too far.
We have made a covenant with God
And with the Torah, His great gift
That our fathers received in Sinai,
With the aim to prevent
Those who have become strangers

From taking part in our affairs and to prevent
Thistles and briars from growing in our
castles.

We are servants of the Lord, it is He
Who has made us and not we.

Therefore, we decree, and we accept for
ourselves, for our sons and for those who have
joined us, that no one of our community, as
from today and for fifty years, shall dare to
study, under pain of excommunication, the bo-
oks that the Greeks have written about physics
and metaphysics, either in their language or
translated into other languages, before reaching
the age of twenty-five years; likewise we
forbid that anyone of our community should
teach these sciences to other members before
they have reached the age of twenty-five years,
so that these sciences may not drag them along
or turn them from the law of Israel, which
excels them all. How comes it that they are not
frightened to judge between a human science
—which rests on similarities, demonstrations
and concepts – and the science of the Most
High, since between Him and us there is no
proportion or similarity? Can man, who lives in
houses of clay, judge the God who created him,
and he himself say – God save us! – what he
may do and what he may not do? This would
lead, indeed, to a total disbelief, against which
those who study the Torah must be protected
with a firm hand.

Nevertheless, we exclude from our decree the
science of medicine, even though it belongs
to physical science, since the Torah allows the
physician to cure.

We have proclaimed this excommunication on
the book of the Torah in the presence of the
whole community, on the Sabbath correspon-
ding to the pericope *Ele ha-devarim* of the year
5065 [31 July 1305].

Anathema of Barcelona, doc. 1
Solomon ben Adret and thirty-seven other signatories

Yedayah Penini's reply

The *Apologetical Letter* is a long letter in which Rabbi Yedayah Penini refutes systematically the tenets of the anathema proclaimed by Solomon ben Adret. Rabbi Yedayah complained of the decisions imposed by the Barcelona rabbis and, determined to stand up for freedom of thought and opinion, he wrote to the distinguished rabbi of Barcelona, expressing the misgivings caused by the statements that had been made in the anathema against Provence and its Jewish sages.

This forceful reply from Rabbi Yedayah is a veritable statement of principles that were shared by all those who, like him, did not consider philosophical and scientific studies to be a danger to the fundamentals of Judaism but rather a necessary and beneficial complement that supplemented and enriched it.

Apologetical Letter, 1305

You who have such a brilliant mind and pure thoughts, what have you done, slandering us all in this way, condemning in writing the whole country and moreover conveying all this to those who are far away and who have seen nothing and who have only had word of the excellencies of the generations of this country in the study of the Torah and of the sciences, and in the fear of God, which are already known to you who are our neighbours and who are well acquainted with us?

[...]

What truly worries us and what we all find to be frightening, is that you have sent your document to the regions of Sepharad. On reading it we see that you brand us as contemptible and derisive before our brothers of the four points

of the Earth; it tells us that letters such as these have also been sent to all Germany and France, and that on this land it has been sentenced to vote for its extermination and the effacement of its name, since as long as all these opinions of us remain current, the Lord does not live among us or have His throne here. What will the sages everywhere do on learning of this disapprobation? Will they believe it straight away and heed you on learning that it comes from your lips because your name is revered in their countries and no one contradicts even the most insignificant of your orders in any of their regions? Or will they all rise up in anger as one sole body against this attempt to make Provence a scapegoat?

Yedayah Penini, *Apologetical Letter*

Translation from Hebrew by Manuel Forcano
La Lletra Apologètica de rabí Jedaia ha-Penini
(*The Apologetical Letter of Rabbi Yedayah Penini*),
Barcelona 2003

2. The admonishment of the kabbalists

Likewise, Rabbi Solomon ben Adret reproved the positions of some kabbalists, such as **Abraham Abulafia** and **Nissim ben Abraham**, who carried their mystical speculation to the extreme of proclaiming themselves prophets and messiahs and who based the practice of their kabbalaha on magic, superstition and numerology.

The case of Abraham Abulafia

The rabbi from Zaragoza, Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240-1291), came to Barcelona in the year 1270 to study the kabbalah and his teacher was Baruch Togarmi. Abulafia represents the summit of practical or ecstatic kabbalah, which consisted of seeking union with the divinity through the repeated uttering of the names of God, making multiple combinations of the letters of these names and entering a state of ecstasy through breathing techniques, music, chanting and head and body movements, with the aim to achieve the mystical experience that he described in his books

and treatises which include some very daring erotic pictures.

In 1281 he presented himself as a prophet and a messiah in Sicily, where the scandalised response of the Jewish communities led to his return to Barcelona. Solomon ben Adret, who had always advocated a kabbalah that was strictly theoretical, conservative and secret, fulminated against Abraham Abulafia's messianism and condemned him to four years' exile on the uninhabited island of Comino, near Malta, in 1285.

The case of Nissim ben Abraham

Nissim ben Abraham, a Jewish visionary who was active in the Castilian town of Avila, also declared himself to be a prophet. His followers held that, although he was illiterate, an angel had infused him with sufficient wisdom and inspiration to write a mystical book, *The Wonder of Wisdom*. The community of Avila addressed Solomon ben Adret, who began an investigation of the case and finally came to reprove Nissim ben Abraham for having proclaimed himself to be a prophet

and a forerunner of the Messiah.

Despite this, Nissim continued to preach and set the date of the arrival of the Messiah at July-August 1295. Those who believed him fasted to prepare for the day ordained and sold all their belongings. The Messiah, however, did not appear and the chronicles state that Nissim's disillusioned followers became converted to Christianity. Nothing is known of what became of Nissim himself.



Gold ring that was found in a woman's tomb in the necropolis on Montjuic. 13th-14th century. It bears the name "Astruga", meaning luck, that was a very common name amongst Jewish women in medieval times.

Barcelona History Museum

The mark of Solomon ben Adret of Barcelona

Ben Adret strengthened the role of Barcelona on the European and Mediterranean map of the great philosophical, theological and political controversies of the Jewish communities and defended the orthodox views as opposed to the rationalist ideas of the followers of Maimonides and the advocates of philosophical studies. He also influenced the arguments in defence of Judaism in the disputes with a Christianity that had become a weapon of religious, social and political confrontation as a result of the aggressive preaching of the new urban orders and especially the Dominicans.

Ben Adret's regulatory conservatism, which took shape in a brilliant output of jurisprudence on the application of the sacred texts to everyday life, cannot be considered separately from its historical moment, but it transcended its times. His opinions have been the object of study in the Talmudic academies for centuries and continue to be consulted today by religious Jews around the world.

For the lasting mark he left as a moral, religious and legal authority of Judaism, Rabbi Solomon ben Adret, better known by the acronym of his name in Hebrew, RASHBA, is a capital figure in the history of medieval Catalan culture and one of the most influential Barcelonans of all times.

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