CHAPTER FOUR
THE INTIMACY OF EXCEPTION: THE DIAGNOSIS OF SAMUEL ABENMENASSÉ
Hussein Fancy

Never have you seen a man more obedient to his doctor. Every piece of medical advice he received, he acted upon, and nothing else.¹

From a certain perspective, the Crown of Aragon appeared to be running against the current of Europe. Since the time of Augustine, the Church had spoken of Jews as servants of Christians (servus est Christiani), at once debased and tolerated.² Over the thirteenth century, as princely power grew, this theological tradition was joined to the royal habit of speaking of Jews as servants of the royal chamber (servi camerae regis), at once possessed and protected.³ As has been argued, if the Augustinian and royal tradition of servitude granted Jews a measure of stability and protection, then it also placed them at the whim of the Church and kings. Thus, the narrative continues, when in the thirteenth century both Church and state began coordinated efforts to demonize, convert, and expel Jewish communities, little could impede their actions. So, it has come as some surprise that over the same period, above all between 1276 and 1283, during the reign of King Pere III (r. 1276–1285), a handful of Jewish families came to enjoy prominent positions in the royal administration. This has led some to speak of a “Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry,” an extraordinary

¹ Bernat Desclot, Crónica del Rey en Pere e dels seus antecessors passats, ed. Joseph Coroleu (Barcelona, 1885) (hereafter cited as Desclot, Crònica), ch. 168: “Car hanch no vahés null hom pus obedient a son metge que ell era, que tot ço que li consellava son metge que degués fer segons medicina, ell feya, e no nulla altra cosa.”
period of secular toleration and intellectual creativity that belies the language and image of servitude.4

This brief essay offers a diagnosis of Jewish servitude and privilege in the realms of the Crown of Aragon during the reign of King Pere. In particular, it traces the rise and fall of Samuel Abenmenassé, the royal physician. Although David Romano, half a century ago, catalogued many of the documents related to this figure, the aim here is less to add new material than to demonstrate an almost perfect alignment between the doctor's career and the king's ambitions.5 While drawing upon William Chester Jordan's insights into the intimate connection between Jewish servitude and royal supremacy in France, it argues—as Jordan does—for the specificity of the case.6 Rather than toleration, this paper contends that Jewish privilege was inextricable from the sovereign aspirations and shifting political theology of the Aragonese kings. As such, rather than inclusion or exclusion, this privilege mirrored the kings' own claims to sovereign exception; and by extension, the precariousness of Samuel's privilege also reflected the thin fiction of Pere's absolute authority. The case of Samuel Abenmenassé reveals how ideas of radical exception and transcendent authority masked deep dependence and irreducible indeterminacy.

Despite his prominence, little can be said about Samuel's origins. By the time he appears in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon, he was already an intimate of the king.7 Other than a name, we know nothing about Samuel's father. We are left with only three pieces of evidence: his surname, the fact that he spoke Arabic, and that he held property in Valencia, all of which suggests that the Abenmenassé family (or in Arabic, Ibn Manasha family) once lived in Islamic lands, perhaps the Almohad province of Valencia until its conquest by the Crown of Aragon.8 What is certain is that like other Jewish elites, Samuel served as a member of a family attached to the

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7 Barcelona, Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó (hereafter ACA), R 43, fol. 129r (13 February 1279).
8 I have chosen to render Samuel's name as “Abenmenassé,” following Romano. Nevertheless, Samuel's surname appears in a variety of forms in the Chancery Registers: Bonnemaiz, Amanaxi, Amanaxe, Abenmanaxi, Avenmenaze, and Avanivanessa, which suggest that his name was Ibn Manasha. Romano, “Los hermanos Abenmenassé,” pp. 249–50, speculates that the Hebrew was אבו מנשה.