**PART 1**

**The rise of Iberian empires and Jewish positioning**

# Opening

Dear Brothers in America! Every Jew in Western lands, apart from his political fatherland, must acknowledge, honor and love Germany as the mother country of his modern religion and of his aesthetic principles – in short, of modern Jewish culture. I am convinced that every educated Russian Jew harbors the same feelings of piety toward German culture. I am, therefore, also confident that his Jewish heart leads him to side with Germany in its present military campaign against Russia. (Hermann Cohen, 1915)[[1]](#footnote-2)

The emphatic “Appeal to the Jews of America” was penned by German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) at the beginning of World War 1. Printed in several newspapers in America, it was meant to serve as a piece of global Jewish propaganda on behalf of the German Reich. During the first months of hostilities, Cohen and other Jewish intellectuals sought to recruit the Jewish Diaspora to serve as an expedient worldwide network essential for the victory of their home-states in the Age of Empires. In the first years of the world conflict, Jewish leaders and intellectuals in Europe and beyond tried to convince both their coreligionists and prominent representatives of the various empires that the interest of world Jewry and those of the German Reich or the British Empire were perfectly aligned. The meetings between Jewish and imperial agents sparked much imagination and reflection; more often than not the global role that the Jewish Diaspora could play during and after the war was the subject of speculation and prognostication. Thus, Hermann Cohen dreamt of a German victory over Russia, describing it with ecstatic superlatives: “It will be the greatest triumph of the German Jew when his fatherland is permitted to bring about such a true liberation, the inward rejuvenation of East European Jews by means of gradual progress.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Cohen even framed German expansion eastwards as “the true achievement of the historical meaning of Jewish emancipation.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

A few months later, however, Cohen discovered the harsh truth that the march of war and the expansion of the German Empire did not always go hand in hand with Jewish interests. In 1916 following accusatory reports of low Jewish participation on the front (based on fabricated statistics), Cohen began to ask himself and his German coreligionists: “What remains for us now to do with the insinuations of this particular Jewish statistic?” Far from his earlier expectations, his answer was now: “Jews at all times have known that the only thing that can protect and sustain them is their Judaism, i.e. their personal and intimate trust in God.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Cohen’s imperial euphoria thus receded into disillusionment. Tensions and antagonism between the German Empire and the people of God felt bitter when contrasted with his grand fantasies of the past. The only remaining certainty for Cohen was the existence of an intimate connection between God and His people – a theme which would later be developed extensively in Rosenzweig’s magnum opus, *Der Stern der Erlösung*. At the same time, leading religious Zionist thinker Rabbi Abraham Kook (1865-1935) adopted another position. For him, the tension between European powers and the Children of Israel was heading towards an inevitable apocalyptic resolution: “The blood that was shed in the land will be atoned only by the blood of those who shed it, and the atonement must come: the total dismantling of all the foundations of contemporary civilization… and in its state will arise a kingdom of a holy elite.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

We could expand this list of intellectuals indefinitely, citing examples of the shifting Jewish positioning vis-à-vis historical empires. Collaboration united with varying levels of enthusiasm and delusion, a sense of particularistic religious elitism in the midst of competing world powers, or messianic visions of an apocalyptic clash of empires – all of these have long featured in the Jewish imperial imagination. The present section of this book is devoted to an archaeology of Jewish imperial positioning many centuries before the events of the First World War: the Jewish responses to the rise of Portuguese and Spanish empires in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Jewish-Iberian merchant and scholar Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) serves as our focus, a key figure for understanding the complexities of Jewish participation in early modern empire building. The following chapters investigate conflicting Jewish attitudes toward Iberian empire-building: ranging from a sense of collaboration, to a messianic vision of a clash of empires (after expulsion after 1492), and to a sense of Jewish, and more specifically, Sephardic elitism in the midst of conflicting empires.

# Chapter 1: A black slave in a Jewish home

## Biccinai of Guinea

In the register of Pisan notary Giuliano del Pattiere, one reads the following act dated June 5, 1472:

The brave and magnificent knight and doctor in law, Lord João Teixeira, orator and ambassador of the illustrious King of Portugal, sojourning actually in Pisa, gave by the present public document and in perfect right […], a donation which no claim of ingratitude could revoke, conceded on title of gift to Davide [da Tivoli], and confirmed by the signature of his father in law Vitale da Pisa and by my signature, Giualiano [da Patere] notary, […] a black slave girl with the name Biccinai of Guinea Terra Nova, aged of eight or nine years, not yet baptized...[[6]](#footnote-7)

The notarial registry records an unusual transaction. In the city of Pisa, a Portuguese ambassador, obviously Christian, gifts a black, non-Christian slave girl to a Jewish Tuscan loan banker, Davide da Tivoli. The transaction takes place in the presence of the latter’s “father in law, Vitale da Pisa,” also a prominent Jewish loan banker. The value of the slave is declared to the tax authorities as 20 florins. Notorious historian of Tuscan Jewry Michele Luzzati was able to cite only one other analogous case of a slave being sold to a Jew in the 15th century. In a notarial act dated March 14, 1475, Lazzaro da Volterra and his brother registered their possession of a female Turkish slave, also 8 years old, for a value of 40 florins.[[7]](#footnote-8) Scrutinized by the Church and Italian states, Tuscan Jews, even members of prominent loan banker families like the da Pisas or da Volterras who could afford such luxuries, generally refrained from owning slaves. This is certainly why the religious status of Biccinai as “not yet baptized” is explicitly stipulated. This was to allay any concern of a Jew owning a Christian slave. As early as the 5th century, the *Codex Theodosianus* and later Gregorius Magnus’ epistles (6th century) proscribed the practice: “no Jew is entitled to possess Christian slaves” (*ne Iudaeis christiana mancipia habere liceat*).

By contrast, rich Christian merchants and bankers in Florence, Pisa, and Lucca had begun to purchase black female slaves for household chores and sexual pleasure from the 1460s onwards. Although very expensive, the ownership of black female slaves would rapidly become a sign of distinction for the Christian entrepreneurial elite.[[8]](#footnote-9) The particular trajectory of the eight-year-old Biccinai was therefore unique. She and her family were likely captured or bought by Portuguese sailors in the vast region then called “Guinea” which in the 1470s had begun to be exploited for the slave trade.[[9]](#footnote-10) She was brought to the household of Dom João Teixeira in Lisbon and from there was transported aboard a Portuguese vessel sailing to Rome via the port of Pisa. There, she was gifted to a new lord – a Jewish one – Davide da Tivoli. She was likely the first black slave owned by a Tuscan Jewish family in the 15th century – a novelty that hints at a broader shift in Jewish attitudes toward the expansionism of Christian empires.

[Add a map with the travel of Biccinai]

Except for the notarial act cited above, we lack any further documents tracing Biccinai’s itinerary from “Guinea Terra Nova” to Portugal and to Pisa. We also possess no information about her ultimate fate. Yet, it is still possible to reconstruct the larger historical context in which the life of Biccinai and those of many other black slaves in the 15th century were situated: the age of Portuguese maritime expansion and the beginning of the slave trade in the mid-15th century.

In his 1453, *Crónica de Guiné,* royal chronicler Gomes Eaneas de Zurara (c. 1410 – c. 1474) describes the capture of black slaves in an early expedition to Cape Blanco (1444). The expedition was commanded by Lançarote de Freitas, the almoxarife of the city of Lagos who “understood well […] the profit that he could gain from his expedition”:[[10]](#footnote-11)

They [the Portuguese] looked towards the settlement and saw that the Moors [a generic term for Africans], with their women and children, had already emerged as quickly as they could from their dwellings because they had caught sight of their enemies. But they [the Portuguese], shouting out “St. James,” “St. George,” “Portugal,” attacked them at once, killing and taking all they could. […]

And at last, our Lord God […] willed that for the toil they [the Portuguese] had undergone in His service, they should that day obtain victory over their enemies, as well as a guerdon and a payment for all their labor and expenses; for they took 165 Moorish captives, including men, women, and children, besides those who perished and were killed.[[11]](#footnote-12)

The exploration of the African coast beyond Cape Bojador from the late 1430s went hand in hand with sporadic slave raids and later with the full establishment of the slave trade. In the passage quoted, Zurara vividly narrates how the hunt for slaves rapidly became the first concrete instance of profit in the nascent Portuguese explorations of the Dark Continent. In his *De prima inventione de Guinée* written toward the end of the fifteenth century, Diogo Gomes mentions negotiations between Christians and “these [African] people” near a great river, probably in Senegal: “They reached a peaceful agreement and they established a trade. They brought from this area many blacks for purchase [*pretos por compra*]. Since then until today, they bring innumerable blacks every day…”[[12]](#footnote-13) Diogo Gomes complains in the same chronicle about certain Genovese merchants who inflicted “great damage”; they brought the rate of “one horse for seven blacks” to one to six. Gomes praises himself for imposing the lucrative rate of “one horse for fourteen or fifteen blacks.”[[13]](#footnote-14) This episode illustrates well how the exchange of Biccinai between a Portuguese merchant and a Tuscan was part of a broader network of Italian-Portuguese collaboration. Genovese and Tuscan merchants were active at that time in the slave trade, taking part in African expeditions, purchasing slaves in Lisbon, and shipping them to the Italian Peninsula.[[14]](#footnote-15)

The eight or nine-year-old, Biccinai reached Portugal after having been either traded or seized with her family in one of these Portuguese expeditions. In his Chronicle, Zurara famously describes the lot of the first black captives upon making landfall:

On the next day, which was the 8th of the month of August [1444], very early in the morning, by reason of the heat, the seamen began to make ready their boats, and to take out those captives, and carry them to shore, as they were commanded. And these, placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight; for amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white like mulattoes; others again were as black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere. But what heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another; others stood groaning very dolorously, looking up to the height of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help of the Father of Nature […] But to increase their sufferings still more, there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and who began to separate one from another, in order to make an equal partition of the fifths; and then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. No respect was shewn either to friends or relations, but each fell where his lot took him.[[15]](#footnote-16)

From the mid-1450s, some thousand black slaves were shipped annually to Portugal and other countries in Europe.[[16]](#footnote-17) They soon became a mark of prestige in households in Lisbon and other cities in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. This might explain why the Portuguese Ambassador, João Teixeira, owned the young black slave Biccinai. As a leading jurist in the court of the monarchs Afonso V and João II, he could easily purchase black slaves arriving from Africa.

If evidence regarding Biccinai is scanty, the voice and thought of Teixeira are voluminously presented in his extant literary work, a panegyric of King João II. There, one reads at length of the king’s praises: “With the help of Divine Providence, thanks to his unique virtue and the great sailing expedition attempted, he discovered so to speak another new world.” Praises expend further explaining: “thanks to these discoveries, the bodies and souls which were black before, are becoming clean and white, thanks to the paint of the sacred baptism which our most Christian King has applied to them.”[[17]](#footnote-18) Since the first slave raids, such arguments were used to justify the capture and trade of black slaves. A similar justification is raised by Zurara; after describing, with some compassion, the terrible experience of the slaves being separated from their families, he ultimately justifies their lot:

… before they had lived in perdition of soul and body; of their souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the holy faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings… But as soon as they began to come to this land, and men gave them prepared food and covering for their bodies… And what was still better… they turned themselves with a good will into the path of the true faith… And now reflect what a guerdon should be that of the Infant [Dom Henrique] in the presence of the Lord God; for thus bringing true salvation, not only to those, but to many others, whom you will find in this history later on.[[18]](#footnote-19)

The institution of slavery was soon accepted by Portuguese elites as part and parcel of a larger endeavor to expand imperial territories and to Christianize their inhabitants. In a bull issued in 1452, Pope Nicholas V accorded King Afonso V the right to “invade and conquer any land of the Saracens and Pagans” and entitled him “to reduce infidels to a perpetual servitude” [*in perpetuam servitudinem redigendi*].[[19]](#footnote-20) He did, however, express the hope that “numerous Guinean, and other blacks captives, who were not procured in exchange for prohibited things, and were brought to the kingdom of Portugal in accordance with a legal contract, will in their majority end up converting to the Catholic faith.”[[20]](#footnote-21)

In his panegyric, Teixeira expresses his enthusiasm for Portuguese expansion, explaining its goals:

These are golden times, fortunate and prosperous […], a new generation of princes has appeared, who discovered so many and such excellent things. All this, all-mighty king comes from the Heavens. Each day, we yearn to reach these promontories, these [unknown] regions of the Niles, and through them to come to the beginning of the Indian sea, and from there to the bay of Barbary and Arabia, this spear of land leading to such infinite riches. There we reach territories where your name and fame, our glory, achieve their greatest heights.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Delineating a grandiose project of naval expansion, Teixeira combines his discussions of commercial interests and the newly discovered maritime routes to India with invocations of Divine Providence and declarations about the glory of extending the King’s fame. Further depicting this new extension of the King’s reputation and reach, the orator proceeds to compare João II’s deeds “which will never be forgotten,” to those of the “founder” of Rome whose “empire given by the gods, all should obey.” No less than Fabius, “who restored all of Italy to Rome,” no less than the father of Hannibal, Hamilcar “who after the Carthaginians lost their right to empire, succeeded in recovering it,” João II’s maritime successes earn him a new imperial form of kingship. The wealth of classical references used by Teixeira to praise the maritime expansion along the African coast as well as the transportation of the young slave girl to Pisa point to the deep involvement of the distinguished Portuguese ambassador in the Portuguese kingdom’s transition to empire, they outline also the geographical and cultural path that Biccinai had to follow, as she was transported along the new commercial routes that this nascent empire was busily constructing.

## The reasons for the gift of Biccinai

The notarial register of Biccinai written by Giuliano del Pattiere sheds some light on the terrible journey that the young Guinean girl would have been forced to endure. It also illuminates the spread of the institution of black slavery among the Portuguese social elite, and in southern Europe more broadly. Yet the notarial act provides no insights into the circumstances that prompted Portuguese ambassador, João Teixeira to give such a precious gift to a Jewish banker family in Pisa. For this, we must turn to another source: a Hebrew epistle sent from Lisbon to Pisa along with Biccinai.

In March 1472, around the period of the Jewish festival of Passover, Jewish Portuguese merchant and courtier Don Isaac Abravanel sent a long Hebrew letter to his Jewish Italian business partner, the Jewish Tuscan loan banker Vitale or Yehiel da Pisa. Yehiel certified and ratified, together with the Portuguese ambassador, the gift of Biccinai to his son-in-law, Davide da Tivoli.[[22]](#footnote-23) Due to its exceptional rhetorical eloquence, including the construction of a lively narrative out of the skillful juxtaposition of biblical verses, the Hebrew letter was copied in several manuscript collections containing other samples of Medieval Hebrew rhetorical prose.[[23]](#footnote-24) The notarial register of Giuliano del Pattiere and the few manuscript copies of Abravanel’s letter have preserved the memory of Biccinai for centuries – until they were gradually discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries. Jewish scholars have, however, rarely discussed this early evidence of a black slave in a Jewish home.[[24]](#footnote-25) The present chapter is devoted to rescuing the memory of Biccinai, to elucidating the nature of her bondage, and connecting her sale to the new relations among Christians, Moslems, black Africans and Jews, relations prompted by the imperial expansion of the Portuguese empire in the 15th century. These new interreligious and interethnic relations in the wake of the emerging Iberian empires will be the subject of subsequent chapters.

In the middle of Abravanel’s Hebrew epistle, one finds details about the circumstances that brought the Portuguese ambassador to Italy:

… our Lord the King [Afonso V], he will rejoice in the Lord, sends his messengers before him to the Pope to bow down to him with their face to the earth, and lick the dust of his feet. From time to time, at the anointing, all the messengers of the King bow down to the Pope. His messengers are the greatly exalted Prince Lopo de Almeida,[[25]](#footnote-26) and a wise, perceptive and good man, Doctor João Teixeira,[[26]](#footnote-27) who brings this letter to you. Both have access to the royal presence and are closest to him.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Abravanel’s epistle and Biccinai shared a ship with the two Portuguese ambassadors whom King Afonso V of Portugal had sent to the newly elected Pope Sixtus IV (August 1471), in order to declare his obedience.As was common practice in such missions, the Portuguese kings sent prominent literati in order to impress the pontiff with their eloquent speech.[[28]](#footnote-29) The words of these particular ambassadors are no longer extant, but later orations have been conserved and often printed; they contain extensive self-praise of the Portuguese expansion along the African coast led by fifteenth-century Portuguese monarchs. Thus, in 1485, in a speech of obedience delivered by the ambassador and *letrado* Vasco Fernandes de Lucena in name of King João II, he refers to his monarch with a new title: *Senhor da Guiné.*[[29]](#footnote-30) Moreover, he elucidates in celebratory terms the progress of territorial Reconquista begun by “Afonso I the first Portuguese Prince” and continued by João I, “this second Scipio, who decided to shift from a defensive war into an offensive war in Africa.”[[30]](#footnote-31) Lucena concludes by delineating the king’s manifold achievements and by declaiming “the explorations of Ethiopia [southern regions of the African coast] accomplished [by Afonso V] with so much energy, that within four years […] he has brought more benefits to the Kingdom of Portugal and the Christian people than in the forty-two years prior.”[[31]](#footnote-32) He also extolls “the unprecedented quantities of gold and merchandise brought from these regions.”[[32]](#footnote-33) The trade of black slaves like Biccinai is not mentioned for obvious religious reasons, even though slave stock constituted an important part of these celebrated profits. Similar praises were surely present in Teixeira’s or Almeida’s obedience speech delivered to Pope Sixtus IV, since King Afonso V had just recently conquered the Moroccan cities of Arzila and Tanger in August 1471.

Yet the circumstances that led the Portuguese ambassador João Teixeira to come to the home of the Jewish banker family of Yehiel da Pisa and to give him a precious black slave were separate from his mission to the Pope:

The doctor in his goodness, knowing how to distinguish between good and evil, interceding for the welfare of all our kinsmen, always seeking our peace and prosperity because his hand is guided by God, wonderful is his love for me, I would bind him unto me as a crown and he shall be a spokesman for me. He will speak to the Pope. We have sought his favour, to speak to the Pope of the affairs of the Jewish communities […] and convince him, according to the Torah, to respond to our petitions and requests. He accepted our list of requests and petitions to serve as a reminder to him when he is in the presence of the Pope.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Teixeira was not only a royal messenger to the Pope in Rome. He was also the private emissary sent on behalf of Portuguese Jewry and one of its leaders. The ambassador agreed to undertake this dual mission for various reasons: his personal friendship with Abravanel, his moral and social qualities, his close associations with Portuguese Jewry, and of course the financial rewards that the Jewish economic elites were sure to provide. The relationship between the Portuguese king and his entourage with Abravanel can be gleaned from another contemporary document: a letter that King Afonso V addressed to the Jewish Portuguese merchant dated 1472. In this royal epistle, the king confirms Abravanel’s privilege to reside outside of Lisbon’s Jewish quarter “in compensation for his special services.” The king’s appreciation of Abravanel’s financial services can be further adduced from the following lines of the same letter: “we wish that henceforth, he shall enjoy and benefit from all the honors, privileges, liberties and franchises which the Christian neighbors and inhabitants of this city [Lisbon] enjoy and should enjoy.”[[34]](#footnote-35)

The private mission undertaken by Teixeira on behalf of Portuguese Jewry demonstrates the extent to which Jewish Portuguese merchants and courtiers like Abravanel involved themselves in Portuguese diplomacy. This is further evident in the complex relationship between Texeira and Abravanel. Abravanel alludes to his efforts in Lisbon to convince Teixeira to accept the private mission. He begs his Tuscan friend Yehiel da Pisa to favorably receive the Portuguese messenger “with your beautiful gift of speech” – one of the praised qualities of the Beloved in Song of Songs 4:3. The precise details of the meeting between Teixeira and Yehiel are difficult to discern from the letter, yet it is likely that Yehiel first received the epistle when the Portuguese ship landed at Livorno or Porto Pisano. The meeting between Texeira and Yehiel took place later and the latter likely would have had ample time to prepare. Abravanel offers Yehiel practical advice as to how Texeira should be welcomed:

You shall say that from the ends of the earth you have heard songs, songs in honor of the king, our master, who dispenses justice and righteousness unto all his people, and loves the Jews, a king who lays the foundations of justice in his land, and in reward for his meritorious deeds, all the nations shall serve him. May his name endure forever, he shall rule from sea to sea and his kingdom shall be exalted![[35]](#footnote-36)

Abravanel recommends that Yehiel praise the Portuguese king using language drawn from Isaiah 24:11: “From the ends of the earth we hear singing: ‘Glory to the righteous One.’” The previous verse in that chapter concerns the new miraculous spread of the glory and name of God all the way from the east to the western “islands of the sea.” The biblical imagery of divine expansion was meant to parallel the Portuguese expansion of King Afonso V in Morocco and along the African coast. Abravanel goes on to propose another biblical verse for his friend’s rhetorical performance, Psalm 72:8, “He shall rule from sea to sea and from the Riverto the ends of the earth.” In this psalm attributed to King Solomon, the verse describes a king’s rule as almost universal in extent. In the obedience speech delivered by Lucena in 1485, a similar biblical verse appears:

The most serene King [João II] – most obedient to the Roman Church and propagator of the Christian cult, [the king] in whose presence the kings of Ethiopia prostrate themselves, offering him gifts each year – confesses and expresses the hope that your Sanctity accomplish on earth what David says in Psalms 71 [72]: “he shall rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes shall bow before him and his enemies lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores shall bring tribute to him. The kings of Arabia and Sheba shall present him gifts.”[[36]](#footnote-37)

The literary similarities between Abravanel’s rhetorical advice to Yehiel and Lucena’s speech of obedience are striking. It demonstrates that Abravanel was aware of the laudatory Portuguese discourse which attended new imperial conquests and discoveries. Abravanel asks Yehiel to echo this Portuguese discourse, to portray the King’s expansion across the sea as the laying of a cornerstone of new imperial kingship, and as comparable to the accomplishments of Solomon, and even more impressive than those of the Roman Empire itself. In his obedience speech, Lucena affirms that Afonso V’s “deeds surpass by far what Sallustius Crispius intended to accomplish against Carthage. Three times, Afonso V crossed the sea to Africa with an immense armada, three times he landed with his well-equipped army on the hostile shores and seized by the arms three cities which were near unconquerable.”[[37]](#footnote-39) This was precisely why Afonso V was awarded the appellation “o africano.”

By having Yehiel echo the imperial self-image of the King and his entourage, Abravanel hoped that the Portuguese ambassador would come to “know that there is a God in Israel, that there is among us [1 Sam 17:46] someone who understands what is happening and that everywhere there are capable, pious and trustworthy men among the sons of Israel.”[[38]](#footnote-41) The reference is to 1 Samuel 17:46; David promises to “cut off” Goliath’s head and “give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the bird” in order that “the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.” In the rhetorical prose of Abravanel’s epistle, the proof for divine presence among the Children of Israel is no longer the severed head of a giant, but rather their acute awareness and understanding of world politics.

## Retributions

Thus, what ultimately brought the Biccinai to the home of the da Pisa family was a complex exchange of services between members of the Christian and Jewish Portuguese elites. This exchange involved not only the use of elaborate diplomacy and rhetoric but also the concrete exchange of money and goods. Thus, after mentioning the secret message that Teixeira “brings with him,” Abravanel describes in the last part of the epistle a list of gifts being sent to Yehiel. The first presents described are manuscripts:

You requested that I your servant, send to your Excellency the commentary on *Ketuvim* by Rabbi David Kimhi, may his memory be blessed in the world to come, and I am presenting before you *The Crown of the Elders* which I wrote along with the commentary on Deuteronomy, which is not complete. Aside from these books, I have found from the [Kimhi’s] commentary on *Ketuvim* only the volume on the Psalms which you already have […] I have also found a new commentary on the Book of Job, which is sweeter than honey. A mysterious sage wrote it when he dwelt in the Kingdom of Aragon. He now lives in the Land of Luso [Portugal]. Take this book and it shall be an aid to you.[[39]](#footnote-42)

Abravanel lists here at least four books, two works he composed himself, two others written by the biblical exegete David Kimhi, and another the work of a contemporary scholar living in Lisbon. The shipping of two of Abravanel’s early works through the intermediary of the Portuguese ambassador was of great significance. And this importance is conveyed in the letter through a bold comparison: “My righteous Lord who tests hearts and minds, you know that these [two writings] are my sons, bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh, and they shall serve you.”[[40]](#footnote-43) Two imaginary sons were thus sent to serve in the house of Yehiel, especially in his study room, to spur his desire to learn and enrich his Jewish knowledge.

Having painted the image of a father sending his “sons” as faithful servants to serve in the library of his distant friend and business partner, Abravanel depicts in no less metaphorical terms the shipping of another servant:

The woman whom the Lord appointed for Isaac you servant, even she declared: he is my brother. God brought a worthy writing and language to you, the book you have produced, to present an offering unto my Lord to strengthen your love and allegiance to him. Why should my name be absent from the doors of his house a house where sages gather? Will God the Most High protect her, if she does not bring to my Lord in its appointed season an offering, an offering of acknowledgment? And because I am not learned I have, behold, a young girl that has not known any man, black yet comely. She is a maidservant, well trained to work and she speaks the language we speak. I offer her to the mistress, your wife, who is like a fruitful vine in your house, so you shall remember my love, the love of women, Excellency, when you shall appear before the Lord. I listened to her voice. The doctor, my master, will bring her to your Excellency, because she was raised in his house until now, and she followed him as if she had been brought up with him.[[41]](#footnote-44)

Abravanel adapts Saul’s confession of guilt to the prophet Samuel “I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord […] because I feared the people, and listened to *their* voice” (1 Samuel 15:24). Abravanel writes “I listened to *her* voice,” thus washing his hands on the exceptional decision to send a slave to his business partner; his wife is to blame. Having thus transferred responsibility, Abravanel conveys the extraordinary character of this gift as well as a certain ambiguity regarding its value – he associates the female slave with the cultural and social inferiority of women. As far as extant records attest, Biccinai was the first black slave to be owned by a Tuscan Jew. This might explain why Abravanel felt the need to disassociate himself from the gift. The exchange of Jewish texts is presented as a far more dignified way of benefiting one’s associate. In another letter sent to Yehiel, written in 1481, Abravanel presents the shipping and copying of manuscripts as the ideal form of exchange, citing the following justification: “This is Torah and we are required to learn it and divine reward is brought by men of merit.”[[42]](#footnote-45) Yet the height of the financial contribution requested from Yehiel called for an exceptional reward: not only Abravanel’s first literary works but also a black slave who belonged to a Christian ambassador.

Biccinai entered the household of Yehiel’s son-in-law as a magnificent gift in gratitude for an exceptional financial service. This unusual maid served as a concrete symbol to the da Pisa family and their associates of Yehiel’s international relationship with the prominent Portuguese Jewish merchant Isaac Abravanel.[[43]](#footnote-46) The introduction of the fruits of Portuguese discoveries and the slave trade into a Jewish-Tuscan home was facilitated by the distant collaboration of Jewish and Christian Portuguese elites in Lisbon and their need to find a partner in Tuscany. In contrast to the notarial register, Abravanel does not explicitly mention the African origins of Biccinai, sufficing with an allusion to Song of Songs 1:5, “black yet comely.” He does, however, provide important information about her social status. She was raised in the household of Teixeira, where she learned to serve, and thus learned to speak the Portuguese language and may even have accompanied Teixeira during his travels. Offering Biccinai to the “mistress” of the da Pisa household, Abravanel’s wife, as she is presented in the letter, alludes to a special and separate channel of communication between two mistresses and their respective households. This feminine channel was, paradoxically, the locus in which the exchange of valuable goods could be expressed; the male channel of communication between Abravanel and Yehiel apparently pertained only to diplomacy, elitist friendship, and the exchange of services and scholarship. Yet, by sending two types of “servants” to the da Pisas—his first writings or “sons”, and the “maidservant” Biccinai—Abravanel was trying to secure the financial favor of his partner with exceptional gifts from the discoveries of his kingdom and the fruits of his mind.

# Chapter 2: Diverging views on the conquest of Arzila and Tangier

From Abravanel’s Hebrew epistle we learn that the slave Biccinai represented a powerful incentive to Yehiel da Pisa, a means of obtaining his financial support for Teixeira’s secret Jewish mission to the Pope. The transmission of Abravanel's letter to Yehiel by a Portuguese ambassador along with the black slave Biccinai, literary manuscripts, and precious political and financial information, provides the vague contours of a system of international collaboration involving several agents coming from independent but interconnected social, geographic and cultural networks: the newly discovered Guiné (Biccinai), Lisbon (Teixeira and Abravanel), Pisa (Yehiel) and the Papal Court in Rome (Pope Sixtus IV). Yet, the story of Biccinai is only one small aspect of Jewish participation in Portuguese expansionist policy. In the following chapters, the nature and complexity of this involvement will be discussed through the prism of Abravanel and his Jewish and Christian contacts. As I will show, Jewish positioning vis-a-vis Portuguese expansionism evolved over the course of the fifteenth century, responding to the changing policies of the Iberian Empires towards the Jews, especially after 1492.

# Christian, Muslim, and Jewish perceptions of social strife in Moroccan lands

The multifaceted nature of Jewish involvement in the Portuguese expansion in Africa is already salient in the story of Biccinai. More information about this subject can be culled from another passage in Abravanel’s epistle in which he describes the Portuguese capture of the Moroccan city of Arzila on August 24, 1471. This was followed a few days later by the conquest of Tangier. The complexity of this event can be further understood by comparing Abravanel’s Hebrew account of the conquest to a contemporary Portuguese one in the *Chronica de el Rei Affonso V* composed by the royal chronicler Rui de Pina in the years 1497-1504. A close reading of these two diverging narratives and perspectives exposes the positioning of a Jewish elitist merchant like Abravanel vis-à-vis Portuguese expansionism and empire-building at an early stage of his career. Close comparisons with other Portuguese or Muslim sources will shed further light on the positioning adopted by Abravanel between the Portuguese Christian kingdom and the Muslim lands of the Merenids.

Rui de Pina’s narrative of the conquest begins with the following tactical remark:

This year and last year as well, the King decided to move onto Africa... The King’s first move and desire was to attack Tangier. Yet since the Kingdom lacked the resources necessary to fight and besiege such a great city, the King abandoned his original design, and with the spirit of a good conquistador […] and hoping to take Tangier later, he settled for attacking Arzila…[[44]](#footnote-47)

This royal desire “to move onto Africa” is not a novelty in Rui de Pina’s chronicle. A few chapters earlier (ch. 135), the chronicler had already explained the Portuguese king’s response to Pope Calixtus III’s call for a crusade against the Turks. This was in 1455 two years after the fall of Constantinople. Rui de Pina recounts: “King Dom Afonso V, a very catholic prince of great courage, in whom a royal blood always search for honor […], accepted the mission with the promise of serving God in such future war with twelve thousands men.”[[45]](#footnote-48) Yet, preparations for the crusade having floundered, and in the aftermath of Pope Calixtus III’s death in 1458, Afonso V “renounced the idea,” and following earlier Portuguese successes in Ceuta and along the African shores, he transformed the “*guerra dos turcos*” into an “*yda d´Africa*,” a descent into Africa “with the intention to take territories from the Moors.”[[46]](#footnote-49) The first territory conquered by the King in 1459 was the Moroccan city of Alcacer Ceguer. This represented the King’s preference for the conquest of Muslim Morocco over the pursuit of further discoveries along the African coast.[[47]](#footnote-50)

[ADD A MAP OF THE PORTUGUESE AND CASTILIAN CONQUEST IN MOROCCO ANDALUSIA AND AFRICA]

Since his first expedition to Africa and his subsequent victory, King Afonso V had every intention “to return to Tangier,” and to complete what he had failed to accomplish in 1437. In 1462, Gibraltar, a Marinid stronghold in the Iberian Peninsula, was conquered by Castile. The following year, King Afonso launched another campaign against the city of Tangier but was ultimately forced to retreat.[[48]](#footnote-51) In 1469, the King’s brother, Infante Dom Fernando, conquered the Moroccan city of Anafé, driven by the “laudable desire to increase his honor and position, thanks, especially to the war against the Moors.”[[49]](#footnote-52) Portuguese and Muslim sources both insist on the divisions, tensions, and conflicts in which the various regional rulers, religious leaders, and Marinid sultans were embroiled. Already in 1436-1437, King Dom Duarte justified his expedition against Tangier, among other reasons, by noting the “fact that [the Moroccans] do not have a king and that they are all [embroiled] in great revolts and disagreement” (*em grandes revoltas e desacordo*).[[50]](#footnote-53) In his *Crónica do Principe do João*, Demião de Gois (1502-1574) alludes to the advantage that could be gained from the recurring military and political conflicts convulsing the Sultanate of Fez. Having given a brief account of these conflicts, de Gois concludes: “in the same year in which Saic [Abra] besieged the new city of Fez, King Dom Afonso arrived at Arzila and took it.”[[51]](#footnote-54) The travelogue of an Egyptian merchant named Abd al-Basit more accurately describes the 1460s as marking the end of Marinid rule, and the kingdom’s subsequent descent into years of anarchy and war. According to his testimony, the last Merinid Sultan “was held at the abattoir, as is done to sheep, and slaughtered.” Then, “the crowd returned to Fez and paid homage to the sayyid Sharif Muhammad ibn Imran… When this became known to the Wattas [the former viziers of the Merinids], they wished to return to Fez and enter the city”. The Egyptian merchant concludes his description much along the line of de Gois:

Thereafter Fez and the districts were the scene of disasters, wars, rebellions, disturbances, corruption, devastation of the land and the killing of men [*harab al-bilad wa-halak abad*]*.* During this intermediate period, the Franks [Portuguese] seized several cities on the coastal region, such as Tanja and Asila [Arzila].[[52]](#footnote-55)

In his *History and Description of Africa*, the historian Leo Africanus (c. 1554) notes that Arzila was “suddenly surprised and taken by the Portuguese.” The surprise was due to the fact that the fall of the last Merinid ruler had left a void, filled by the rivalry for the succession. Indeed, when the Sharif had the last Merinid ruler killed, “Saic Abra being impelled forward by his ambition, proceeded to conquer the city of Fez.” After a first defeat of “the aforementioned Saic,” he “returned and having for one whole year besieged new Fez with eight thousand men, at length, by the treason of the townsmen, easily took it.”[[53]](#footnote-56) The struggle for the central, dynastic city of Fez left the coastal cities of Arzila and Tangier exposed to a new Portuguese expedition.

In 1471, King Afonso V, still obsessed with his desire to conquer Tangier, followed the counsel of his advisors and dispatched spies to Morocco.[[54]](#footnote-57) Thereupon, he resolved to compromise and to turn his sights to the far more modest target of Arzila. If the motivation for Rui de Pina’s chronicle was a desire to glorify the King’s recent conquest of Tangier, Abravanel, by contrast, viewed the unfolding military events in reference to their negative impact on the Jewish residents of Arzila. His own account of the seizure of Arzila, thus opens with the following sinister words:

I have taken upon myself to tell my Lord of our toil and our distress at the hands of the sons of men, we leaders of this community… Incline your ear and listen, listen to the needy, to the hardships which have befallen the Lord’s people, rebuke and disdain did the Lord bring to the community of Arzila from the Kingdom of the Ishmaelites...[[55]](#footnote-58)

The royal chronicler speaks of triumph and glory. The Jewish merchant can only speak of the “hardships which have befallen the Lord’s people” (Exodus 18:8); the Moroccans, as described by Abd al-Basit and Leo Africanus were simply surprised by an external threat arriving in the middle of internal dynastic rivalries and social strife.

## Two narratives of the conquest of Arzila

Having warned his Tuscan addressee Yehiel of the terrible outcomes of the conquest for the local Jews, Abravanel proceeds in his epistle to offer a brief account of how Arzila was easily conquered by Portuguese forces:

Our Lord the king, may God prolong his days in his kingdom, he who stands and shakes the earth, the leader of many people, lifted up a sign to the nations, his horsemen spread themselves and came from afar. He gathered the ships of the sea with their mariners, all that handle the oar and all that pilot, and crossed over to Africa to possess dwelling places that are not his. He encamped there against the city of Arzila, the city of kings and great among the nations, he shot there arrows and laid siege against it. Not one man withstood them.[[56]](#footnote-59)

The Jewish perspective offered by Abravanel is not to be found in his description of the events themselves, but in his use of Hebrew prose, strung together with biblical verses, to depict them. Drawing on Habakkuk’s and Isaiah’s prophetic visions of a God who drives kingdoms to expand at Israel’s expense, a punishment for their sins, Abravanel depicts Afonso V’s third “passage” to Africa as being endowed with providential significance, the fulfillment of God’s plan on earth. This is evident in Abravanel’s use of Joshua 21:42 to describe the Portuguese military victory. The verse in question marks the conclusion of Israel’s conquest and partition of the Land of Israel, reading as follows: “The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands.” The providential role in the Portuguese conquests in Africa was of course a view held by the Portuguese kings and the Pope; yet for Jews like Abravanel and Yehiel, its meaning was more complex: here Christian-Portuguese propaganda is mixed with Jewish messianic allusions referring to the Jewish exile and their future redemption. Abravanel’s use of Habakkuk 1:6 to narrate the king’s expansionist policy is an excellent example of this ambiguous attitude: “I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth *to seize dwellings not their own*.” On the one hand, the use of this verse seems to contradict the express instructions which Abravanel gives to Yehiel – to welcome the Portuguese Ambassador amicably and to praise King Afonso V’s rule beyond the sea; the use of the verse here sheds light on the brutality of conquest. On the other hand, God is time and time again referred to here as the secret mover of the Portuguese king, impelling him and his people to travel beyond their borders, to launch expansionist conquests with a secret messianic end; it is this which justifies the collaboration between Jews and Christian within this new network.

In his *Chronicle of Afonso V*, Rui de Pina describes the ease with which the Portuguese forces made their landing and besieged Arzila. The city held out for less than three days – all thanks to “the large pieces of artillery brought by the king [*grossas bombardas que el-Rei levava*].”[[57]](#footnote-60) After the landing and bombardment, on the morning of August 24, the “alcaide of the city asked [the King] to settle upon an agreement. […] Spurred by the rumor that the [walls of the] city had been breached, the men of the camp ran to the walls.”[[58]](#footnote-61) In his *Cronica do Principe D. João*, Damião de Gois raises the following suspicion:

…several captains and soldiers, preferring a victory tainted with blood than one of peace and concord, took affront to the King’s pacifistic/nonviolent conquest of the city. For this reason, they assaulted that part of the wall that remained undestroyed and breached it through to the higher parts of the remaining wall.[[59]](#footnote-62)

The time for a diplomatic solution had elapsed. According to Pina’s chronicle, the rest of the day consisted of the quick and bloody capture of the city, especially the *misquita* (mosque) and the *castello* in which the last fighters had found refuge:

And thus finally, the Moors of the city and the citadel having been assaulted, all, without exception, were either killed or captured as prisoners. The prevailing estimate was that the number of dead reached up to 2,000 and the number of prisoners up to 5,000. And a much bountiful and valuable booty was found and taken into the city, estimated at eighty thousand gold *dobras*, most of which the King granted to the pillagers, reserving for himself less than a fifth of it, and maintaining no right to it whatsoever.[[60]](#footnote-63)

In his epistle, Abravanel describes the cruel invasion of Arzila in similar terms:

The people went up into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they took the city and plundered all of it; they kept the silver and gold and took cattle and herbs as their booty. The king and those who have access the royal presence did not lay hands on the spoil. See, the gentiles were ill-tempered and complied with every man’s pleasure. They utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, ten thousands of souls, those destined for captivity, to captivity, and those destined for the sword, to the sword. Afterwards the king seized the city of Tangier. [[61]](#footnote-64)

Abravanel attributes the massacre and the pillaging of Arzila to the initiative of the “people,” suggesting no involvement on the part of the King and his entourage. To this end, he appropriates the biblical narrative in Esther 9 which depicts the Jews massacring their enemies in “in the citadel of Susa” while the Jews “did not lay hands on the spoil.” In a certain sense, the later chronicles of Pina and Gois confirm that the sack of the city was less orchestrated than it was spontaneous. Abravanel quickly concludes his narrative of the conquest, only briefly mentioning the conquest of Tangier but noting that the city was “great among the nations.”

Rui de Pina is naturally far more expansive in his account. He mentions a “written contract” (*contracto escrito*) with the former ruler of Arzila, Mulei Xeque, “concerning the limits and places which were attributed to each one [King Afonso V and Mulei Xeque] from which they could collect their tributes.”[[62]](#footnote-65) Rui de Pina proceeds to describe how “two Moors confirmed that the inhabitants of Tangier, […] fearing that massacre and pillaging […] should affect them too, deserted the city entirely – leaving it empty of their persons and estates, and filled with fire.” After sending a first contingent who “entered the city without resistance,” “the King, content with such a fortunate course of events, […] immediately entered the city of Tangier, together with the Prince and the nobles of his court; he entered, feeling no ardent desire to destroy or to exact vengeance, a feeling which had filled him until that day [*sem o ardente desejo de sua destruyçam e vingança em sempre vivia*].”[[63]](#footnote-66) If King Afonso had originally tempered his desire for conquest, renouncing Tangier for the humbler target of Arzila, fortune now offered him an unexpected prize, his original goal, the city of Tangier itself. Thus a long series of military disasters and failures, stretching from 1437 to the campaigns of 1463-1464, finally came to a victorious end:

And thus, the King renewed and increased the titles he already possessed and gave himself the following new title: D Afonso, by the grace of God, King of Portugal and of the two Algarves, before and beyond the sea in Africa. And after conquering many territories and after making numerous Moors his subjects and tributaries, and after announcing his excellent victory to the Pope and to all the other Christian kings and princes, he departed with the Prince to Portugal on September 17. The next day, he arrived in the harbor of the city of Silves. Within thirty-three days […] he had accomplished great deeds, a great service of God. His status and name were increased and praised worldwide. The Christians of Andalusia received this victory with no less joy, feeling a sense of security – which they celebrated with festivities for the people and religious processions for God. From Silves, the King and the Prince sailed immediately to Lisbon, where a great triumph was organized, with great feasts and rejoicing, festivities which spread with news of victory throughout the kingdom for many days.[[64]](#footnote-67)

Abravanel dedicated only one short sentence to describing the capture of Tangier. Yet this victory changed the entire meaning of the Arzila campaign, transforming it from a limited military victory into the unprecedented projection of King Afonso V’s power, altering his title and fame. Ironically this glorious victory pushed King Afonso V to once again involve himself in Castilian affairs, trying by alliance and war to bring about a unification of the two crowns.[[65]](#footnote-68) At the end of the Portuguese-Castilian war (1475-1479) the Catholic Monarchs would resume the Reconquista of Granada in the 1480s, a project which had long been cherished by the Castilian and Portuguese monarchs in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[[66]](#footnote-69) The son and heir of Afonso V, King João II learned his lesson from Portugal’s failed involvement in Iberian politics after the victory of 1471; upon his coronation in 1481, he resumed the pursuit of coastal discoveries and expansion in Africa.[[67]](#footnote-70) Nonetheless, the conquest of Arzila and Tangier marked a watershed for Iberian expansion into the Muslim Merenid lands of Andalusia and Morocco and parenthesis in the African coastal expansion towards India.

## Victory masses in mosques

According to de Pina’s chronicle, the capture of the cities of Arzila and Tangier was marked by the conversion of each city’s central mosque into a church and the officiation of Christian services therein:

And thus, as the king felt that the deed of the desired victory was entirely accomplished, he went at once to the mosque of the Moors, where, on the body of the Count of Marialva he already found a cross, which, at the beginning of the service and sacrifice to God, he immediately kissed and worshipped. Having completed his prayer, next to the body of the aforementioned count, he knighted his son, the Prince, effusively praising his abundant goodness and worth. And at the end of this pious and glorious scene, both of them clad in victorious arms, the King said to the Prince, not without shedding a few tears: “Son, may God make you as good a knight as he who lies here.”[[68]](#footnote-71)

In a mass held on August 25 in the mosque of Arzila, King Afonso V celebrated the inaugural military deeds of his 16-year-old son, Prince Dom João; he was knighted as a “cavaleiro,” next to the body of the Count of Marialva, who had fallen in battle. This mass was a powerful reaffirmation of the dynastic principle and of chivalric values. In his *Chronicle*, Gois reproduces the King’s speech to his son. The King explains that “chivalry is virtue mixed with an honorable power – according to nature, its help is most necessary in establishing peace on earth, especially when lust or tyranny […] put kingdoms and individuals at unrest.”[[69]](#footnote-72)

The solemn declaration of chivalric virtues accompanying the prince’s knighting concluded the acts of conquest and opened a new cycle of propaganda. An excellent example of this can be found in the chronicle *Vidas e feitos d'el Rei Dom João II* written by Garcia de Resende (1476-1536). There the Prince’s chivalry in battle serves as a literary device designed to presage the image of the future King.[[70]](#footnote-73) “Beset by and exposed to great dangers in battle,” writes Resende, “the King always found the prince at his side, striking the Moors with such bravery that his sword, drenched in Moorish blood… was bent. Being only sixteen years old, he gained much praise for [his acts of] bravery.”[[71]](#footnote-74)

Upon King Afonso V’s later triumphal arrival in Tangier, Rui de Pina also mentions that “[The King] went immediately to the mosque which had already been transformed into a church.” There, according to the chronicler, he “named Prior St. Vicente Fora de Lisbon bishop of the city, who, belonging to the order and rule of St. Augustine, was already entitled to be bishop of the city.”[[72]](#footnote-75) Referring to the “apostolic authority” of St. Augustine over North Africa, Rui de Pina depicts the victorious King of Portugal as restoring the historical African diocese of the ancient Church father to its rightful owner. De Gois in his *Chronicle* prefaces the narrative of conquest with a history of the city, beginning with its mythological and historical foundation by the Romans, to its conquest by the Visigoths and later by the “mouros,” and finally, after many failed attempts, by the Portuguese. He then adds the following remark: “this city, which the Portuguese kings failed to conquer for much time, even though they had mobilized extensive forces [to this end], and incurred much pain and many losses and expenses, was finally conceded to them by Divine Providence with no delay and with neither [the use of] sword nor [the shedding of] blood.”[[73]](#footnote-76) For de Gois, the proof for the providential character of the seizure was not only its peaceful nature but its date, August 28, “the day on which the church celebrated the memory of the blessed Saint Aurelius Augustinus, Bishop of Hippo Regius.”[[74]](#footnote-77) In his account, Leo Africanus offers almost the same information about the mythology and history of Tangier and the Portuguese conquest of the city. He was surely one of the major “Arab” sources mentioned by De Gois. Yet the Portuguese chronicler has substantially changed Leo Africanus’ concluding remarks which originally read as follows: “But that which the Portuguese king could not bring to pass with those two Armadas, he achieved finally with a few soldiers and without spilling blood as before, when it pleased fortune [quando piacque alla fortuna].”[[75]](#footnote-78) De Gois simply Christianized Leo Africanus’ “fortune” into a demonstration of Divine Providence evident in the nonviolent victory of the Christian king over the Muslims.

As attested in the chronicles of Rui de Pina, Garcia de Resende, and Demião de Gois, victory celebrations began in the mosques of Arzila and Tangier but soon spread to Lisbon, the rest of Portugal, and even to Andalusia and the Papal Court in Rome. Though the *oratio* delivered by Teixeria or Almeida to Pope Sixtus IV in 1472 has been lost, we can extrapolate its contents from a similar *oratio* delivered in 1481. In that instance, Ambassador Garcia de Meneses boasts of the capture of Tangier years earlier, noting that its inhabitants had been “filled with fear and desperation and, [facing the prospect] of a [Portuguese] siege, […] [had] surrendered to the perfect King [Afonso V].” He then adds: “I will not relate the details of the many, great victories won by the captains of our armies against the defiant barbarians over the course of almost seventy years.”[[76]](#footnote-79) Teixeria and Almeida were surely no less lavish in their praises of the conquest.

## The defeated Jews of Arzila

The Portuguese chronicles quoted shed light not only on the triumphalist atmosphere which pervaded the Portuguese discourse of 1471, but also on the nature of Teixeira and Lopo de Almeida’s diplomatic mission to the new Pope. In Abravanel’s Hebrew epistle, the narrative of the conquest pursues a different path, contrasting sharply with celebrations and the masses in conquered mosques and the King’s triumphal return. Shifting his gaze from the victorious Portuguese army, Abravanel turns his attention to the defeated Arzilians. As demonstrated earlier, Abravanel knew all too well how to maneuver within the new framework of Portuguese expansionism and was skilled in articulating his own particularistic Jewish concerns within such a context. We have already seen how he enlisted the royal ambassador Teixeira as a private Jewish emissary. Abravanel was even careful to refer to the new title and fame of King Afonso V with Psalm 72:8: “he shall rule from sea to sea.” This knowledge is further evident in the way Abravanel narrates the siege and conquest of Arzila. The deeds of the King and his army in Arzila and Tangier serve as the backdrop for the properly Jewish part of his account: the fate of the city’s Jewish residents in wake of conquest.[[77]](#footnote-80)

Abravanel draws a stark distinction between the “children of Kedar [the Arzilian Muslims]” “slain with the sword” and those “whom [God] singled out,” the Arzilian Jews. According to his account, “none of the children of Israel died” – a miracle compared to by Abravanel to the plague of livestock in Exodus 9. The distinct fortunes of the children of Kedar and Israel thus point to an act of divine intervention and separation, expressed in Abravanel’s letter by the Hebrew verb *hifla*. The verb is drawn from Exodus 9:4: “But the Lord will make a distinction [*hifla*] between the livestock of Israel and that of Egypt, so that no animal belonging to the Israelites will die.” In Abravanel’s narrative, this separation of the Arzilian Jews from their former Muslim neighbors leads them into the hands of “the chiefs of Edom.” And these Christian leaders were “alarmed when they saw […] all the souls that came out the city in captivity.” It is not entirely clear from this passage if Abravanel is referring here to the shipping of the Arzilian Jews to Portuguese soil, but we may surmise that they arrived with the rest of the Portuguese soldiers, first in Silves and later in Lisbon. This interpretation seems to be supported by Abravanel’s use of the first verses of Exodus 1 to describe their fates: “the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob […] came into Egypt.” This seems to refer to their transportation from their native land (Arzila) to their land of bondage (Portugal).

Abravanel continues to describe “two hundred and fifty men, faint with hunger, thirst, naked and lacking everything.” Such a terrible description of the fates of the Arzilian Jews seems to refer to a group of prisoners forced to travel on ships for several days. When Abravanel writes, “We saw the precious sons of Zion, the people of the God of Abraham, once valued as gold, now sold as bondmen and bondwomen, in the furnace of affliction, shackled in iron,”[[78]](#footnote-81) he seems to be referring to the sale of Arzilian Jews as slaves in Silves or Lisbon. The following lines of his account seem to confirm this:

They [the Portuguese] made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and in brick […] Their wives were raped. Daughters of Israel, that were as cornerstones carved in a palace, are placed in the hands of cruel men, forced to uncover their nakedness. And the children … they asked for bred… Their tongues learned the names of other gods, the foreign gods of the land.[[79]](#footnote-82)

Hard labor, sexual servitude, and conversions were the common fate of slaves – as we saw in the case of the black slaves in fifteenth-century Portugal.[[80]](#footnote-83) Twenty-seven years after the landing of 235 African slaves in Lagos, described by Gomes de Zurara, King Afonso V, his court, and his soldiers landed in the nearby city of Silves, probably with the 250 Jews of Arzilia and other slaves of war. Were they sold there or in Afonso V’s final destination – Lisbon? Regardless, the sale of these Jewish prisoners may have been conducted in a manner similar to Zurara’s description cited above: “What heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company?”[[81]](#footnote-84) The Portuguese chronicler’s empathetic reaction is echoed in Abravanel’s account: “Our eyes looked unremittingly, straining to see them.” Using Deuteronomy 28:32 – “Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation, and your eyes looked unremittingly, straining to see them, powerless to lift a hand” – Abravanel skillfully mixes the biblical curses of Jewish exile with the strong feelings of empathy sparked by the spectacle of Arzilian Jews sold as slaves to Christian masters. In Zurara’s account, the moral conflict ignited by the strong pity felt for the black slaves is ultimately resolved through the “salvation of the souls,” that is, baptism. In Abravanel’s epistle, the prospect of baptism is precisely what impels “the leaders of the community […] to offer a ransom for their soul with our silver and gold.”[[82]](#footnote-85)

## Liberating the Jewish slaves

Don Isaac Abravanel recounts at length how he was selected by rich Jewish Portuguese families to carry out a special mission, traveling from town to town in order to redeem and release these Jewish slaves. In his account, Abravanel uses this act of liberation to celebrate the role assumed by the Jewish- financial elite of Portugal:[[83]](#footnote-86)

I, and someone else from among the leaders were sent from one city to another, men who continually traverse the land to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt […] So those [leaders of the Portuguese Jewish financial elite] who remained [and did not directly take part in the mission] told us: with a generous spirit of request a bountiful dowry, […] and pay concerning these Jews as you see fit. Free every and woman from the hand of the oppressor […] Take double money in your hand and bring all your brethren out of all the nations *as an offering to the Lord*, *that they shall be redeemed by money*.[[84]](#footnote-87)

The complex role played by the Jewish elites is imbued with religious and political dimensions represented by Abravanel’s adaptation of two verses from Isaiah. By inverting Isaiah 53:3 (“You were sold for naught; and you shall be *redeemed without money*”) into “you shall be redeemed *with* money,” Abravanel attributes to the Jewish elites and their financial capital limited – but nevertheless substantive – redemptive powers generally associated with God Himself. The second verse is Isaiah 66:20: “**‘**And they will bring all *your people*, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as *an offering to the Lord*—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,’ says the Lord. They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the Lord in ceremonially clean vessels.” The ransom of the Arzilian Jews, taken “from all the nations to my holy mountain in Jerusalem,” is framed also as a pre-messianic “offering to the Lord.” Maintaining “all your brethren out of all the nations” within the fold of Jewish religion, it secures the social and religious background for God’s future messianic intervention. An intervention eased and prepared, as already mentioned, by Portuguese expansion.

Thanks to the wealth of the Jewish Portuguese elite, Abravanel succeeded in liberating about 150 Arzilian Jews:

The Lord has led us both [Abravanel and another member of the Portuguese Jewish elite] on our path […] and He inclined all their captors to be kindly disposed toward us. For full price, within a few days or ten we ransomed one hundred and fifty men, and to here in the city and all other cities, the people of that Land [Arzila] are now many, the ransomed of the Lord.[[85]](#footnote-88)

Abravanel describes a relatively easy and rapid ransom of more than half of the Arzilian Jewish sold into slavery. This was likely because Arzilian Jewish captives were brought to Lisbon and were sold to households in the city or the cities around. Abravanel and his companions seem to have been absent from the landing and selling of the Arzilian Jews, which took place sometime around September 17, 1471. Nevertheless, the Jewish elites of Lisbon mobilized themselves rapidly to liberate their coreligionists. In his letter dated early March 1472, Abravanel complains, to Yehiel that he has “had no repose … for six months,” referring to his intensive involvement in the affair of the Arzilian Jews. After describing the initial ransoming of 150 Arzilian Jews, Abravanel mentions a total number of “two hundred and twenty persons and the cost of the ransom of their soul – ten thousand doubloons in gold.” It seems that in the second stage of his mission, the Jewish merchant from Lisbon succeeded in redeeming another seventy slaves.

In his epistle, however, Abravanel notes that thirty slaves “remain in captivity […] because they have fallen into the hands of harsh masters.” That the slaves were sent to different locations as well as the large sum needed to ransom them might explain the long duration of Abravanel’s mission. Moreover, the epistle discloses that “because of the iniquities of their masters, they [the thirty Arzilian captives] left for a long journey to the other side of the sea.”[[86]](#footnote-89) The meaning of a “long journey” to “the other side of the sea,” is unclear – though we know many slaves sold in Lisbon were re-exported to Iberian cities like Seville, Valencia, Barcelona, or even to Italian cities such as Livorno, Florence, and Genoa.[[87]](#footnote-90) Such a journey is not without similarities to that undergone by Biccinai, who was shipped from Guinea to Lisbon and finally to Tuscany by Abravanel himself. The proximity of fate between the remaining thirty Jewish slaves and Biccinai is not reflected in Abravanel’s attitude. Whereas he pleads to God “to protect” and “deliver” the Arzilian Jewish captives “from the burden of the Egyptians,” Biccinai is offered as a “sacrifice” and “offering of acknowledgment” to Yehiel.

## A new diglossia

Abravanel also describes the social and linguistic networks that he and his associates navigated in their efforts to assist the newly released Arzilian Jews:

Actually, nothing of the property of these impoverished individuals that was doomed stuck to their hand. They were naked for lack of clothing. They had nothing to eat and they were all a people whose language you do not understand. We had to inquire from husbands and wives if the daughters were indeed their daughters, and the children their children, and so that we might restore the lonely to their homes, reunite parents with children, and provide them with necessary items, diverse one from another, clothing to wear, and to give them each day corn and bread. It will take two years until they know the rules of the God of the land and until their sons of Israel learn the same language and words of a strange [Portuguese] people.[[88]](#footnote-91)

Using the motif of the division of Laban’s flock in Genesis 31:43, Abravanel discusses the division of families during the process of selling. Enneas de Zurara described the very same process in the case of black slaves in a passage already mentioned in his *Chronica de Guiné*. Facing this hardship and humiliation, Portuguese Jewish elites could still assume the responsibility of reuniting Arzilian families; black slaves had no such recourse. The Jewish Portuguese merchant depicts his efforts and those of his companions in effecting the reunion of husbands and wives, children and parents using Psalms 68:6-7 which exalts God’s role as redeemer of the “fatherless,” the “widow,” and the lonely. Abravanel further explains how he provided long-term support for these families, helping them reestablish a minimal economic capacity, but more broadly allowing them to resettle in various Jewish communities in Portugal. If the Christian monarch, in his desire to expand his kingdom into Africa, robbed the Arzilian Jews of their freedom and status, the Jewish Portuguese elite, with the partial acquiescence of Christians, succeed in securing their coreligionists a new status in the Portuguese Kingdom.

The process of integration entailed, among other things, socio-linguistic adaptation: the assimilation of the Portuguese language and Portuguese social norms. Abravanel depicts this shift of the Arzilian Jews from Arabic to Portuguese as the metamorphosis of “a people whose language you do not understand” (Deut. 28:49) into a people whose sons have learned “the rules of the God of the land” (2 Kings 17:26) and “the same language and words” (Gen 11:1) as the rest of the Portuguese population and the Jewish Portuguese community. Furthermore, Abravanel skillfully adapts a verse from 2 Kings 17:26: “The people you deported and resettled in the towns of Samaria do not know what the god of that country requires,” conveying the process of cultural adaptation that the Arzilian Jews will soon undergo, assisted by their Jewish patrons. The positive social and cultural outcome of the assimilation process is conveyed by the biblical verse Genesis 11:1 which describes the state of linguistic unity that prevailed prior to the building of the tower of Babel and the subsequent dispersion. Having undergone this socio-linguistic transformation, the Arzilian Jews will cease to be associated with a hostile people and religion – with the Moors and Islamic religion – and will now embrace the rules and language of the Portuguese and Christian power, just as Iberian Jewry did in the aftermath of the *Reconquista*. Nevertheless, the common language shared by Christians and Jews – Portuguese – is still referred to as the language “of a strange people,” as suggested by Abravanel’s allusion to Psalms 114:1. When contrasted with Hebrew and its central role in Jewish religious life, the Portuguese vernacular remains the language of the Christian “stranger.” Abravanel’s juxtaposition of Genesis 11:1 (linguistic unity) to Psalms 114:1 (the distinction between Israel and Egypt) to describe the status of the Portuguese language for Portuguese Jews is a clear example of Jewish medieval multilingualism and diglossia. Abravanel's Hebrew account of the Portuguese conquest of Arzila and the redeeming of the Arzilian Jews reaches its end with him praising the shift from a state of Hebrew-Arabic diglossia to one of Portuguese-Hebrew. What began as a destructive blow and an act of humiliation inflicted by Christian expansionism, concludes with the victims successfully integrating into the country, language, and culture of the victorious side.

## Passover in a Christian land

Having described the success of his mission, Abravanel proceeds to imagine how these slaves, recently liberated, will celebrate the upcoming Passover holiday:

And on this night which is a night of vigil, in their villages and encampments, they shall praise the Lord for he is good. Together they shall lift up their voices and all the sons of God shall shout for joy: we were slaves for a short time and the Lord led us out of the slavery into freedom and out of bondage into redemption, and now we are, as all the multitude of Israel, free.[[89]](#footnote-92)

This idealized and imagined celebration of Passover by the Arzilian Jews can be contrasted to Rui de Pina’s previously mentioned depiction of the masses held in Arzila and Tangier – a celebration of the victory and conquest of Muslim lands after the fall of Constantinople. In the Portuguese chronicle of Rui de Pina, the mass held in the aftermath of victory celebrated the Divine Providence that attended the Avis dynasty, embodied in the victorious king and his son. It is also probable that Abravanel saw or at least heard of “the solemn procession and devout sermon” marking the return of the “box of bones of the Infante” (caixa da ossada do Infante) “brought to the city of Lisbon in the year 1472.”[[90]](#footnote-93) Rui de Pina’s description of those events reads as follows:

The bones were brought from the boat and were transported with much magnificence to the city of Lisbon, entering by the gate of Santa Caterina, whence they were escorted by a solemn procession. At the Pryol of Sam Domingo, Sir Afonso delivered a devout sermon, most appropriate for the occasion, in which he spoke words of such piety and compassion that people were moved to tears as if it were Maundy Thursday. From there, the bones were deposited at the Monastery of the Savior and then transported to the Monastery of the Battle, and finally brought to their proper resting place with a dignified funeral in the chapel of King Dom João his father. There, according to clear testimony, God performed several miracles in honor of the merits of the Infant and in order to mark his good fortune.[[91]](#footnote-94)

In Abravanel’s letter, written in an atmosphere of Christian exaltation, the Passover celebration of the Arzilian Jews is presented as the reenactment of the Jews’ commitment to God, to God’s first redemption of Israel in Egypt, and to His continuous involvement in Jewish history, manifested in the liberation of the Arzilan Jews. However, this imaginary celebration of the Passover is also meant to express gratitude to the Jewish elites of Portugal who saved them in God’s name and in God’s place, assisted by their crucial positions within Portuguese Christian society. Abravanel's narrative can be viewed as an attempt to justify the type of Jewish-Christian collaboration that characterized the Iberian *Reconquista* and its aftermath; he is essentially illustrating the advantages of cautious Jewish participation in the Portuguese *Reconquista* taking place in Morocco.

If this Passover celebration seems to finally join the Christian celebration of the victory described by Rui de Pina, Abravanel does not stop here. He prefers to conclude his story of the partial rescue of the Arzilian Jews with an ambiguous statement:

When all is said and done, throughout the entire kingdom of Portugal we have not heard nor seen that many people of Israel who are the lowest of slaves, when strangers carried away his army, or so many women of the Judah taken captive by the sword. Upon hearing that, the ears of the Jews shall tingle. They will clap their hands and shake their heads: blessed be the name of the Lord! How great are his signs and how mighty are his wonders? [[92]](#footnote-95)

Abravanel shrewdly closes his account with lines taken from King Nebuchadnezzar’s epistle to “the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth.” Having witnessed the miraculous rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the furnace, the Babylonian king declares “how great are His [God’s] signs, how mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; His dominion endures from generation to generation.” Abravanel’s reference to Daniel 3:33 seems to allude to the equilibrium reached between royal power and Divine Providence, an equilibrium that saved Daniel and his companions from the fire just as it saved Arzilian Jews from bondage. Abravanel further alludes to the great dangers involved in Portuguese expansionism using the verse Gen 9:25: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” North-African Jews risk suffering the same fate as other African slaves. Therefore, Abravanel calls upon Yehiel and his fellow readers or listener of the epistle to “clap their hands” at his success in saving most of Arzilian Jewry from the same fates suffered by African Moors and black slaves like Biccinai.

## Jewish fate in North Africa

Abravanel’s rescue of the Arzilian Jewish slaves contrasts sharply with his gift of a black slave to Yehiel. This contrast, however, does not feature as a contradiction. On the contrary, Abravanel’s Hebrew epistle is infused with a deep sense of pride at the Jewish ability to intervene in a royal diplomatic mission to the Pope. It imbues the author, a court Jew and merchant, his Jewish elitist entourage—and more broadly the entire Jewish diaspora—with a sense of value. The individual and collective elitism of the Abravanels and other Jewish merchant families in Lisbon was built upon a complex relationship with the court and the leading international trading families operating within the city. This elitism could benefit the entire Portuguese Jewish community as demonstrated by the Jewish recruitment of a royal ambassador like Teixeira. It could also help the Arzilian Jews as demonstrated by the efforts expended in ransoming them. The narration of this act of liberation clearly distinguishes between the fates of the Jews and the fates of the Moors and black slaves. This sense of relative superiority is developed in Abravanel’s letter into a complex notion of collaboration with the new expansionist policies of the Portuguese. Yet the participation of Jews and Christians in Portuguese maritime expeditions comes at the expense of the Jewish communities in the fifteenth century Merinid-Muslim Maghreb.

In the aftermath of the failed Portuguese assault on Tangier in 1437, the tomb of Idris—a scion of the Prophet Muhammad and founder of Fez—was rediscovered by the *shurafa*, the charismatic, religious leaders of the city. This discovery sparked religious Muslim fervor resulting in a mob assaulting the Jewish community. The Jews who survived these riots were subsequently forced to transfer their residence from the old city to the *mellah,* the Jewish quarter in the new city of Fez. In those years (1437-1443), the Portuguese Infante Dom Fernando was held prisoner in the city.[[93]](#footnote-96) The *Crónica do Infanto-Santo D. Fernando* written by his fellow captive João Álvares refers to a Jew in his entourage, a certain “meestre Josep,” who played a central role as a messenger between the Merinid Sultan, the Infanto, and Portuguese officials.[[94]](#footnote-97) He was, however, not the only Jew in the prince’s entourage. In Dom Fernando’s will, written before his departure from Portugal in 1437, another Portuguese Jew is referred to: the father of Isaac Abravanel, who granted him a loan of 52,000 *reis* *brancos* (*Braunel Judeo morador em Lisboa sincoenta e dous reis brancos que me emprestou*).[[95]](#footnote-98)

As evident from the anti-Jewish riots in Fez, Jews often fell victims to the tensions between the Merinid Sultan, the vizirs’ clan, and religious leaders. Another example of this tension is narrated by the Muslim traveler Abd Al-Basit mentioned before whose chronicle describes the events of 1459-1465. The Merenid monarch Abd al-Haqq “appointed a Jew of Fez, named Harun ibn Battash […] and made him a deputy vizier, restricting the power of the vizier; in doing so he wished to antagonize the Banu Wattas [the clan of the viziers] [members of which] he had killed.” The travelogue of Abd Al-Basit describes Harun’s appointment as deputy vizier as a provocation on the part of the Sultan, which brought about “Jewish control over the Muslims of Fez (*tusaliṭu al-yahud ‘ala al-muslimin min ahl fās*).”[[96]](#footnote-99) The description of this religious scandal serves as the starting point for a detailed narration of the revolt led by the religious *shurafa*, who proclaimed: “He who will not go forth for the sake of Allah has no *muruwwa* [Bedouin chivalry] and no religion—holy war, holy war!” He was then “joined by the multitude.” They succeeded in forcing the mufti to confirm in writing that “[the political role of Harun] constituted a violation of the Covenant [of Omar]”:[[97]](#footnote-100)

When he [the Mufti] had finished writing, they hastened to the *hara* (the Jewish quarter) and wielded their swords against the Jews, killing as many as Allah wanted them to kill; they did not leave even one until they had killed the last, so as to clear the quarter of them. This was a glorious day in Fez and a great slaughter. A numerous Jewish community was killed on that day. Afterward, they turned to the palace of government…[[98]](#footnote-101)

The Jewish vizier Harun and the Sultan Abd al-Haqq himself were each killed a few days afterward, marking the end of the Merenid period and the beginning of a period of violent rivalry among the *sharif*, the Banū Wattas clan, and other factions. “Thereafter the people of the cities distant from Fez learned of these events. They rose against the Jews of the cities and did to them what the people of Fez had done to their Jews.”[[99]](#footnote-102) In her comprehensive study of all the accounts of the “revolution of Fas,” Mercedes García-Arenal has raised serious doubts concerning the extent to which Jewish communities in Fez and other Merenid cities were destroyed.[[100]](#footnote-104) Regardless, even if we adopt a more cautious approach to Abd Al-Basit’s testimony, the riots of 1437 and the revolution of 1465 demonstrate the fragile position of the Moroccan Jewish communities at the end of the Merinid period. Against this historical background, Abravanel’s liberation of the Arzilian Jews and the subsequent rehabilitation of these Jews in the Portuguese Christian Kingdom takes on new meaning. It highlights the advantage enjoyed by Portuguese Jews, especially their economic elites, in contradistinction to Jews in Morocco. Such disparities between Jewish communities reflected the advantage of the Portuguese Christian Kingdom over the crumbling Merinid Sultanate and the military victories of the new rising maritime empire on the Moroccan and African shores.

# CHAPTER 3: Iconography of expansion and conquest

The military and political superiority of the Portuguese Christian Kingdom over the decaying Merinid Sultanate in Morocco serves as the backdrop not only to Abravanel’s narrative but also to the many royal celebrations of the Portuguese victory in Morocco and Portugal.[[101]](#footnote-105) The demonstration of this superiority constitutes a central message in the four large tapestries commissioned by King Afonso V and his entourage to celebrate the victory. The tapestries, ten meters wide and four meters tall, depict the Portuguese army disembarking, besieging, assaulting, and conquering Arzila, and then doing the same to Tangier. Like the chronicles of de Pina, de Gois, and de Resend, these impressive artistic works of royal propaganda forcefully associate conquest and overseas expansion with the image of dynastic continuity between King Afonso V and the Prince João. The iconography of conquest and expansion demonstrated in this series of tapestries, the subject of the present chapter, will offer an important key to understanding the development of imperial representations among the Portuguese elite, Christians, and Jews.

## The commission of lavish tapestries

The details of how the tapestries in question were commissioned are not extant. Many scholars, however, maintain that they were commissioned during the last decade of Afonso V’s reign (1471-1481) from the famous tapestry-maker Passchier Grenier based in Picardian city, Tournai. Tournai and Arras were prominent centers of Flemish tapestry-making, especially during the period in which the dukes of Burgundy (Philip the Good and Charles the Bold) were availing themselves extensively of Flemish handiwork. Many tapestries from the period depict scenes of war drawn from the Bible and the Classics. For example, the famous *History of Gideon* was commissioned by Philip the Good in 1449. Throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, this art piece served him and his heir as a portable demonstration of power and chivalric values; it was displayed during several diplomatic meetings with other princes and kings and was also utilized as a means of political communication with people in various banquets and ceremonies.[[102]](#footnote-106) In 1472, one year after Afonso V’s conquest of Arzila and Tangier, Duke Charles the Bold received from Passchier Grenier a set of eleven monumental tapestries depicting the Trojan War. Other copies of the same set were sold to various European monarchs and noblemen. Four tapestries belonging to this series later arrived in the Cathedral of Zamora.[[103]](#footnote-107) The same period saw the production of tapestries depicting the life of Alexander the Great (1459) and Julius Caesar (1460), projecting images and symbols of European chivalry into the pasts of classical empires.[[104]](#footnote-108) It is worth noting that the strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between Portugal and the Duchy of Burgundy were strengthened by Philip the Good’s marriage to Isabel of Portugal, aunt of King Afonso V, in 1430. Two years earlier, famous Flemish painter, Jan Van Eyck had traveled to Lisbon as part of a delegation sent by the Duke of Burgundy to discuss the feasibility of this marriage.[[105]](#footnote-109) It was in the Portuguese capital that Van Eyck met Aragonese painter Lluis Dalmau who was part of a different diplomatic mission at the time. Less than two years later, King Afonso V of Aragon sent Dalmau to the Flanders to perfect his craft; he was likely apprenticed by Van Eyck himself.[[106]](#footnote-110) In Bruges, King Afonso V of Portugal had a counter, *feitoria*, and a Portuguese agent, João Rodriguez de Carvalho. Over the course of the 15th century, a large group of Portuguese expats, many linked to Isabel of Portugal, were living, trading, and participating in the cultural life of Bruges and Flanders.[[107]](#footnote-112) Among the many documents related to the Portuguese presence in Bruges, is an official letter dated to 1451 stating that João Rodriguez de Carvalho had purchased on behalf of the King five Flemish tapestries with deeds of arms (*pans de ras de armar*).[[108]](#footnote-113) In Portugal, but more broadly throughout the Iberian Peninsula, a Flemish-Iberian artistic trend developed in its own right, reaching its pinnacle in the Portuguese polyptych produced by S. Vincente de Fora (1461–1470) as well as in the Flemish-Aragonese school of Jacomart, Berrugete, Delmau, and Bermejo. The Catholic Monarchs were also known for their large collection of paintings, which included the works of Flemish masters such as Hans Memling and Dirk Bouts.[[109]](#footnote-114)

The three sets mentioned – *The Trojan War*, *The Life of Julius Caesar,* and *Alexander of Macedon* –and the *Conquest of Arzila and Tangier* all share similar features. They depict complex military scenes and employ an explanatory text. They all provide a visual experience, in which the viewer can follow the progression of historical events taking place on each tapestry and from one tapestry to the next. Often depictions of a maritime expedition, a military confrontation, and the conquest of a fortified city are combined – creating a complex notion of spatial expansion and historical sequence.

A picture containing text, indoor, furniture, rug

Description automatically generated

Figure 1. “The Destruction of Troy,” Cathedral of Zamora



Figure 2. “The Military Exploits and Fabulous Deeds of Alexander,” tapestry from the set *Story of Alexander*, Tournai (?), ca. 1455-1460, Wool, Silk, Gilt-metal-wrapped thread, 415×985 cm, Genoa, Palazzo Doria.



Figure 3. Caesar crosses the Rubicon, Bern Historisches Museum

In the first tapestry of the set, depicting the “Disembarkation at Arzilah,” the standards of Portugal (featuring castles and heraldic signs), the King (a caster with drops and the moto *Iamais*, “never”), and St. George signal the army’s movement from fleet to shore, and from shore to the walls of the city. The disembarkation and progression of the King toward the city are heralded by the sounds of trumpets. Behind the walls, Muslim soldiers and officials wearing turbans are depicted observing the approach of the Portuguese forces; static, they prepare to defend themselves against the invaders. Their banners display the crescent of Islam, pseudo-Arabic letters, and astrological signs. The other details of the city bear no resemblance to a contemporary Moroccan city and are more reminiscent of the features of a rich Flemish town. The text embroidered in the upper part of the tapestry celebrates the military conquest and expansion of the Christian faith with grandiose words: “the fleet of four hundred vessels… an army of 30,000 men [sent] to fight against the Moors for the faith in Jesus Christ.” Particular emphasis is placed on “the disembarkation of the soldiers which turned out very dangerous” and “the King … valuing his ardor for the faith more than his own life, who went to the shore, while many barques sank.”



Figure 4. Tapestry of Pastrana, Landing.



Figure 5. Detail. King Afonso V with trumpets and the banners of the kingdom and the King himself

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Figure 6. Detail. The Moors observing from behind the walls

The movement of the King and his army toward the static Moorish defenders is further developed in subsequent tapestries. The next tapestry is “The Siege” (o cerco): the city of Arzila appears cut off from the surrounding region, encircled by Portuguese ships at sea and Portuguese soldiers on the land. The King and the Prince are depicted to the right and left of the city respectively, each one towering over the walls. The military superiority of the Portuguese is not only conveyed by the well-ordered siege, but also by the technological gap between the contending sides. Whereas the Arzilian soldiers are depicted bearing spears and arquebuses, the Portuguese soldiers bombard the city with numerous canons. At the center of the tapestry, Muslim inferiority is further thrown into relief by the depiction of Portuguese soldiers preparing their canon for fire while a leading Moorish figure seems to transmit a message to the enemy. All chroniclers of the conquest refer to the desire of the “Al Caid” to reach an agreement of surrender.



Figure 7. Tapestry of Pastrana, “The Assault”



Figure 8. Detail of “The Siege.” Depiction of canons and the Moorish defenders

The next tapestry – depicting the assault of the city – duplicates features of the siege and the encircling of the city by sea and land. Now, however, the Portuguese and Moors no longer stand on opposite sides of the walls. The walls of Arzila have collapsed, so to speak, subjected to the fire of the canons and the assault of the Portuguese soldiers climbing the walls and killing most of the Arzilian men of arms. The King and the Prince are still visible on either side of the city; meanwhile, great figures, the banners, and the men literally recover the urban space of Arzila creating an effect of movement and invasion – a movement that began far away with sailing ships and the disembarkation in front of the walls. The siege ends with the successful assault. In the embroidered text, emphasis is placed on the “terrifying struggle [taking place] everywhere as is common between infuriated victors and desperate ones” *(certamen ubique atrox quale inter ixatos victors et desperatos solet*). The importance of the victory is further conveyed by the many “Moors of both sexes who survived the great massacre, and great riches which were more than expected from the capture of such a city.”



Figure 9. xxx

After the three images depicting disembarkation, siege, and assault, the last known tapestry of the set duplicates the setting of the first – the landing. The Portuguese army led by Dom Joao de Bragança arrives, in this tapestry also, to the left side of the city walls. The progress of the army from conquered Arzila to the gate of Tangier proceeds from the upper background to the left foreground. Another central aspect of this tapestry is the visibility of the *millefleurs* pattern. Present in other tapestries of the set, but only in the margin, as military operations progress, this pattern increasingly recedes into the background; in the depiction of the assault, it disappears completely. The reappearance of the floral *millefleurs* pattern in the last tapestry conveys the comparatively peaceful nature of Tangier’s conquest. The banner of Portugal is raised by Dom Joao de Bragança above the city gate with neither siege nor bloodshed. The superiority of the Portuguese leader is represented by the size of Dom Joao de Bragança and his knights, who tower over the walls and the buildings of the city. This leads the Muslim population of Tangier – men, women, and children, soldiers and civilians – to flee the city. The use of the *millefleurs* pattern gives the impression of human order, reflecting the original, divine order, a convention of the period. The movement of this peaceful conquest from the left to the right is reproduced by the waves of the seas. The faces of the Muslim fugitives are turned to the right. A few of them look back to their city and to the victorious Portuguese. One Muslim warrior in splendid armor turns his head to the viewer, his eyes are directed to an abandoned past, his attitude one of sorrow. His face and the faces of the other refugees are marked by resignation. They carry children, goods, and riches with them, fleeing as a disordered rabble, contrasting with the orderly military march of the Portuguese troops. The fugitives are separated from the Portuguese by an inlet, a high cliff, and the walls of the city. The sharp contrast between the Portuguese and the Moors, between military superiority and flight, between victory and resignation, is a fitting conclusion to a set of tapestries meant to visually convey the propaganda of Portuguese and Christian expansion.



Figure 10. Seizure of Tangier by Dom João of Bragança



Figure 11. Detail. The Moors flee

Dom Joao de Bragança was not only a conqueror of Tangier in service of the King and Christianity. He was also the son of Abravanel’s patron, the Duke of Bragança. Abravanel's financial services for the Duke and for the entire Bragança clan are well documented in his description of his life in Portugal (1437-1483) as are his ties with Dom Joao de Bragança, future Marques de Montemor o Novo. No doubt that such proximity helped him to gain access to the enslaved Arzilian Jews and eventually to purchase their freedom. It also shaped Abravanel’s perception of Jewish participation in the Portuguese expansion in Morocco and Africa. The rescue of the Arzilian Jews by and within Portuguese Jewry as well as the present of the black slave Biccinai to a fellow Jewish financier displayed unmistakably the real and imagined advantages of such participation. Jews were neither dying nor fleeing with the Muslims of Arzila and Tangiers; they could separate their fates from those of the Muslims by joining Christian Reconquista and expansion. This was at least the sentiment of Abravanel and his entourage in the immediate aftermath of the conquest of Arzila.

# Chapter 4: The conquest of Granada and the expulsion of 1492: Iberian expansion without Jews

Abravanel's attempt to project himself and his Jewish entourage into Portuguese expansionist policy in the Maghreb and along the African coast corresponded well to his experience during the years of Afonso V’s reign (1449-1481). During this period Don Isaac and his circle profited much from the international trade routes established by the Portuguese. Within a decade (1481-1492), however, Abravanel's impression that his own personal success and Jewish communal welfare would continue to go hand in hand with major trends in Portuguese politics was faced with a serious challenge. In 1483, the newly crowned King João II arrested and executed Abravanel's patron, forcing Don Isaac to flee to Castile that very same year. There, he would soon experience the harsh sequence of events beginning with a war of *Reconquista* against Granada (1482-1492), continuing with the establishment of the Inquisition (1478), and concluding with decrees that segregated and expelled the Jewish population of the kingdom (1477-1492). These would ultimately drive Abravanel and the entirety of Castilian-Aragonese Jewry into exile.[[110]](#footnote-115) In his 1472 epistle to Yehiel, Abravanel was proud of his capacity to deliver the Arzilian Jews from the fate of the vanquished Muslims. At that time, he seemed to entertain the fantasy that Jews could play an important role in the nascent Portuguese empire, intervening between the Christian conquerors and the subjected Moors or black Africans. The next decade would prove a sobering correction to this view.

In 1480, the Castilian Cortes of Toledo issued a decision that impacted Jews and Muslims alike:

Since from continued conversation and common life of Jews and Moors with Christians great damage and unpleasantness is caused [*dela continua conversacion e Vivienda mezclada delos judios e moros con los christianos reultan grades dannos e inconvenientes*], and the *procuradores* have asked us to issue an edict to correct this, we order and command all of the Jews and Moors of all the cities, towns, and places in our kingdoms … that their quarters be separated from those of the Christians and not be in common.[[111]](#footnote-116)

In the same *Cortes*, the Catholic Monarchs claimed that they “were in favor of declaring war against the Moors, but were busy building a navy against the Turks.”[[112]](#footnote-117) The year before (1479), Pope Sixtus IV had issued a bull bestowing “a plenary indulgence” for those who participated in “the war against the Saracens and the infidels of the Kingdom of Granada” (*bellum contra saracenos et infideles regni Granate*).[[113]](#footnote-118) But it was only in 1482, that the Catholic Monarchs and the Pope reached an agreement dividing the weight of the war against the Muslim infidels: “the holly Sanctity against the Turks and the majestic kings against the Moors of Granada.”[[114]](#footnote-119) Like Afonso V, who replaced a crusade against the Turks with a series of wars of conquest in Morocco, Ferdinand and Isabela invested great efforts in war and diplomacy against the Muslim kingdom of Granada, identifying it as an efficient means of enhancing their power, strengthening their army, and facilitating the unification of the crowns of Castile and Aragon.[[115]](#footnote-120) Yet if the Castilian Jews, and Abravanel among them, played a central role in financing these war efforts, the progressive conquest of Granada would transform them into one of the Reconquista’s chief victims.[[116]](#footnote-121) Thus, on January 1, 1483, only one year into the war, royal chronicler Fernando de Pulgar described a decree to expel the Jews of Andalusia:

Since the commerce these people [conversos] conducted with the Jews living in Cordoba, Sevilla and their dioceses was one of the causes of their error [Judaizing], the King and the Queen ordered in perpetuity that no Jew should live in this land, under penalty of death – forcing them to leave their homes and leave for other parts of the Kingdom.[[117]](#footnote-122)

Admiring the Queen’s “disinterest for the diminution of her revenues [from the Jews],” Pulgar explains her policy as one that seeks “purity of her lands” (limpieza de sus terras).[[118]](#footnote-123) The Inquisition’s discovery of “many Christians from Jewish descent returning to Judaizing practices” is not only presented by Pulgar as the official reason for the establishment of the Inquisition but also as a new source of income resulting from the penalties and the acquisition of properties from departing conversos and Jews: “The King and the Queen ordered that these funds be allocated to nothing else save the war against the Moors.”[[119]](#footnote-124)

The connections between the Inquisition, the expulsion of Jews, and the Christian conquest of Muslim lands are seen clearly in the events that followed one of the first great victories won by the Catholic Monarchs: the conquest of the city of Ronda in 1485 which was followed by the surrender of several surrounding cities.[[120]](#footnote-125) The Catholic Monarchs included in their directives for “the good governance of the noble city of Ronda, which we won from the Moors, enemies of our Holy Catholic Faith” the “will that… no Jew could live or dwell [in the city for] more than three days.”[[121]](#footnote-126) Moors and Jews were forced to leave Ronda and find refuge in other territories. The connection between the fates of Jews and Muslims appears several times in the capitulation decrees of the Muslim towns (Almeria 1491), culminating in the capitulation decree of Granada itself which states, “The Jewish natives of Granada […] will benefit from [the capitulations of the Moors] and those who were Christians in the past have a period of one month to cross to North Africa [*passar allende*].”[[122]](#footnote-127) The capitulation decrees given to the Moors by the Catholic Kings seem to accord them a large degree of autonomy; they maintain the relative status quo inasmuch as Muslims were concerned in order to establish effective control over the Muslim cities as quickly as possible. Jews and conversos, by contrast, were expected to leave, or at least to renounce any farming or jurisdiction upon the Moors.[[123]](#footnote-128) None of these developments could have been a source of comfort for Abravanel; they certainly did not concord with his earlier understanding of the positioning of Jews between Iberia and Africa.

The 1492 decree ordering the general expulsion of the Jews was the culmination of the previously-mentioned trends evident in the Castilian-Aragonese politics of the 1480s. It combined notions of the Reconquista with the importance of regenerating the Christian faith and enhancing collective cohesion:

And although […] we knew that the true remedy for all this harm and damage was to separate the said Jews from all communication with the Christians and to expel them from our kingdom, it was our wish to be content with ordering them to leave all the cities, boroughs, and places in Andalusia, where it appeared that they had caused the most damage…[[124]](#footnote-129)

Yet instead of contenting themselves with limited solutions like segregation and partial expulsions, the victorious Catholic Monarchs, together with Holy Inquisition, extended these earlier remedies to the entire, united, and expanding Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon:

When a crime is committed by someone in some society or corporation it is right that such society or corporation should be dissolved and eliminated, and that the few should be punished because of the many and the ones because of the others. And that those who corrupt the good and honest life of the cities and boroughs by their contagion may harm others be driven out of the settlements…[[125]](#footnote-130)

## Reconsiderations after the expulsion

Abravanel departed from the Iberian Peninsula by the port of Valencia in late July 1492 and arrived the following month in the city and Kingdom of Naples. Now a refugee and a Sephardic leader in search of a new individual and communal path, Abravanel’s understanding of Iberian expansionism was forced to evolve. In sharp contrast to his earlier portrayal of the conquest of North Africa, the conquest of Granada does not conclude with the advantageous separation of Jewish and Muslim fates. Quite the contrary, Jews were forced to leave while many Moors were allowed to remain, at least for the next few decades. This change in perspective can be first detected in the introductory pages of Abravanel’s commentary on Kings, penned shortly after his arrival in Naples (1493). In this piece he gives a near-contemporaneous account of the historical background of the expulsion edict:

In his ninth year, the year of the scattering of Israel, the King of Spain conquered the entire State of Granada and the great city of Granada – full of people, princess among states. And due to his feeling of power and his haughty heart, his spirit was renewed, and he offended, imputing this his power unto his god. And Esau [King Fernando] said in his heart, “How shall I appease my god who girds me with strength to wage war? How shall I welcome my Creator who gave this city into my hands, if not by gathering under His wings the nation that walks in darkness, the scattered sheep of Israel, to return this rebellious daughter to his religion and faith or to cast them out to another land, away from my sight.”[[126]](#footnote-131)

In search for an explanation for the expulsion, Abravanel constructs a peculiar narrative centered around the kingdom and city of Granada recently conquered by the Catholic Monarch. He neither mentions the Muslim character of the conquered states nor does he note the disruption of a long-standing Jewish presence in the region. Moreover, he makes no attempt to link the conquest of Granada to earlier Portuguese and Castilian conquests of Muslim territories, which he had himself witnessed and commented upon in the past. Employing language drawn from the biblical story of King Uzziah’s pride after his victory (2 Chronicles 16), Abravanel focuses instead on the negative impact of the military victory and the *Reconquista* over the King’s religious mind. 2 Chronicles 16:16 reads: “But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the Lord his God by entering the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.” Like the biblical King Uzziah, King Fernando believed that his victory had granted him a certain religious right that was not truly his.

In Chapter 102 of his *Memorias del Reinado de los Reyes Catolicos*, Andres Bernaldez describes the dramatic transfer of Granada from the Moorish King Boabdil to the Christian King Fernando. “Take, my Lord, the keys of your city; I and those dwelling within will belong to you,” Boabdil is said to have said. Bernaldez further records that afterwards, “the King, the Queen, and the Court stayed in Santa Fe [a city near Granada] … sometimes in the Alhambra, until the end of May [1492]… They did not venture forth to leave [Granada] until the city was pacified.”[[127]](#footnote-132) The chronicler concludes his narrative of the surrender of Granada with a note on the religious atmosphere that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the *Reconquista*:

After the great city of Granada had been subjugated, vanquished, and put under the yoke of Castile, the King, the Queen, and the Court left the Alhambra in the first days of June [1492] and went to celebrate Easter of the Holy Spirit in Cordoba… victorious and blessed… Thus they marked a glorious end to their holy and laudable conquests. They could see what many earlier kings and princes had wanted to see: a kingdom of so many cities… situated in such strong and beautiful lands conquered in just ten years! Was this not an indubitable sign that God wanted to deliver [the kingdom of Granada] into their hands?![[128]](#footnote-133)

In his own account of religious effervescence in the aftermath of Granada’s conquest, Abravanel resorts to another biblical allusion: “Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself: ‘The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob’ (Genesis 27:41).” The ancient enmity between Esau and Jacob is used to describe the religious reasoning of the triumphant king, ultimately leading to his decision to expel the Jews. It transforms his victory over Muslim Granada into an extreme case of religious delusion linked to the ancient rivalry between Christianity and Judaism. Micha’s question “With what shall I come before the Lord ?” introduces the Catholic King’s choice to sacrifice his Jewish servants as a thanksgiving offering for his victory over the Muslim Kingdom of Granada. In tortuous prose, Abravanel’s account acknowledges the destabilizing effect Christian Iberian expansionism ultimately had on the fate of Iberian Jewry. In the 1472 letter to his Italian associate, Abravanel witnessed the same destabilizing effect that conquest had had on the Arzilian Jews, resulting in their sale as slaves. At that time, however, the collateral damage incurred by Portuguese expansionism was rapidly corrected by the political and economic power of a Jewish elite. With the conquest of Granada, however, the stabilizing role of the elite proves unsuccessful:

When I was there in the court of the king, I wearied myself by crying out until my throat was dry. I spoke to the king twice even thrice, with my very mouth I begged him: “Save O King! Why should you do this to your servants? Ask for many gifts and bribes of gold and silver, everything that belongs to every man of the House of Israel he shall give on behalf of his land.” I called upon my friends, they who had audiences with the king, to ask on my people’s behalf. And the nobles took counsel to speak to the King with all their might, to annul the decrees of anger and wrath, his plot that he had plotted against the Jews to annihilate them. [But] like the deaf cobra he stopped his ears and would not be swayed by anything. And the Queen stood at his right to lead him astray. With her persuasive words, she caused him to carry out his action from beginning to end.[[129]](#footnote-134)

In the letter of 1472, Abravanel described in great detail and with clear pride how he had succeeded in Lisbon and in other parts of Portugal to negotiate with the Christian Portuguese the price for the release of the Arzilian Jews. The success of these negotiations relied on the political and economic integration of the Jewish elite within the Kingdom of Portugal. In 1492, Abravanel and his Jewish and Christian entourage were not negotiating the freedom of a relatively small community fallen victim to Christian Iberian expansionism into Muslim lands; they were negotiating the freedom of their entire community following the completion of the *Reconquista*. In sharp contrast to the 1471 campaign of Arzila and Tangier, the 1492 expansion into the last Muslim Iberian Kingdom did not strengthen the position of Castilian and Aragonese Jewry. Their ancient rights and privileges were quickly suspended, due to the intervention of a new factor, the Inquisition. The edict of expulsion focuses on the “converso problem” marshaling it as its main justification. Yet, Abravanel chooses to neglect the intersection of *Reconquista* and Inquisition in his narrative. Instead, he recasts the episode as a personal interaction between King (the conqueror) and Queen (the bigot). Instead of pointing to successful Jewish-Christian collaboration, as he had done in his letter of 1472, Abravanel’s autobiographical introduction to his 1493 commentary hints at the fact – without, however, fully admitting it – that the pursuit of Christian Iberian expansion into Muslim lands weakened and endangered the status of Iberian Jewry, relegating the Jews to an even lesser position than the Muslims. This was due, according to Abravanel, to the ancient theological rivalry between Christianity with Judaism more than to the new role played by the Inquisition.

As a consequence of these changes, perceived or neglected, Abravanel could no longer play the classical role of a Sephardic court Jew, a redeemer, who takes responsibility for the collateral damage of Christian policy on the Jewish community. Therefore, he adopted the role and image of Esther standing “in the inner court of the king’s palace” and “pleading for her people” (Esther 4:8; 5:1). He risked his fortune and life before the Catholic Monarchs, and was ultimately forced to follow his community into a renewed exile, relinquishing the fate of the Jews to God Himself:

And with no strength, 300,000 people of the nation to which I belong walked by foot. Both young and old, little children and women, in one day from all the provinces of the King – and whither the wind was to go, they went. And their King went out before them; the Lord was at their head. One did say, I am the Lord’s and others write on their hands “[this belongs] to the Lord.” […] And many terrible travails befell them, robbery, destruction, hunger, and plague. […] And God overtook them with the plague and they were a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth until they were swept away utterly by terrors and they remained but a few of many.[[130]](#footnote-135)

# Chapter 5 From the imperial kingship of Solomon to Jewish exile among empires

In the autobiographical piece studied in the previous chapter, Abravanel pondered the link between the imperial and military expansion of the Catholic Kings and the edict of expulsion. The series of events that led from Iberian *Reconquista* to Jewish expulsion had created a new situation for Sephardic Jewry – a new position in which Iberian imperial expansion and its impressive series of successes as the fifteenth century drew to a close were wholly external to the Jewish experience. Facing the challenges of this new position of exteriority and inferiority, Abravanel devoted large swathes of his commentaries on the book of Kings (1493) and the book of Daniel (1497) to discussions of kingship, empires, the nature of Jewish exile, and the process of redemption. In the disseminated texts within these commentaries, he elaborated his first response to this new state of exclusion from the expanding Iberian empires – at the very same time as Columbus and Vasco de Gama were undertaking their epochal expeditions.[[131]](#footnote-136) Abravanel’s commentaries on Kings and Daniel present their readers with two powerful models which will be the focus of the present chapter. The first is the model of the perfect Jewish emperor (King Solomon) and the role played by his faithful lineage throughout Jewish history; the second is a messianic model of expansionism which envisions the empires of East and West locking arms and bringing about their own annihilation.

## General and particular kings

Abravanel begins his 1493 commentary on the books of Kings by pointing to a seminal shift in the history of biblical kingship: the fragmentation of the “general” kingship of Saul, David, and Solomon which gave way to the “particular kingships” of Judah and Israel:

The first statement concerns the changes which occurred in the kingship [of these kings] over the course of history. Indeed, some of the kings mentioned in these biblical books were general kings ruling over the entire nation [*uma*], that is, Saul, David, and Solomon who ruled over all the tribes. You will notice that these three kings were valiant monarchs, fearful of God, and committed to truth. As I explained in my commentary on the book of Samuel concerning the reign of Saul, their kingships spanned one hundred years…These kings were not partial kings, favoring certain tribes over others, as was the case when the kingdom was divided in the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam. You will notice in the stories of King Rehoboam and all his heirs from the house of David… that some of them went in peace and uprightness in the footsteps of their father David, whereas others lied about the Lord and went and worshiped other gods. The reign of the kings of Judah, both those who were good and those who were evil, lasted 396 years. Following the division of the Kingdom, Jeroboam ruled over the remaining tribes. As you will see in their stories, the kings after Jeroboam were all idolaters; none of them escaped this plague. Their kingdom lasted 241 years.[[132]](#footnote-137)

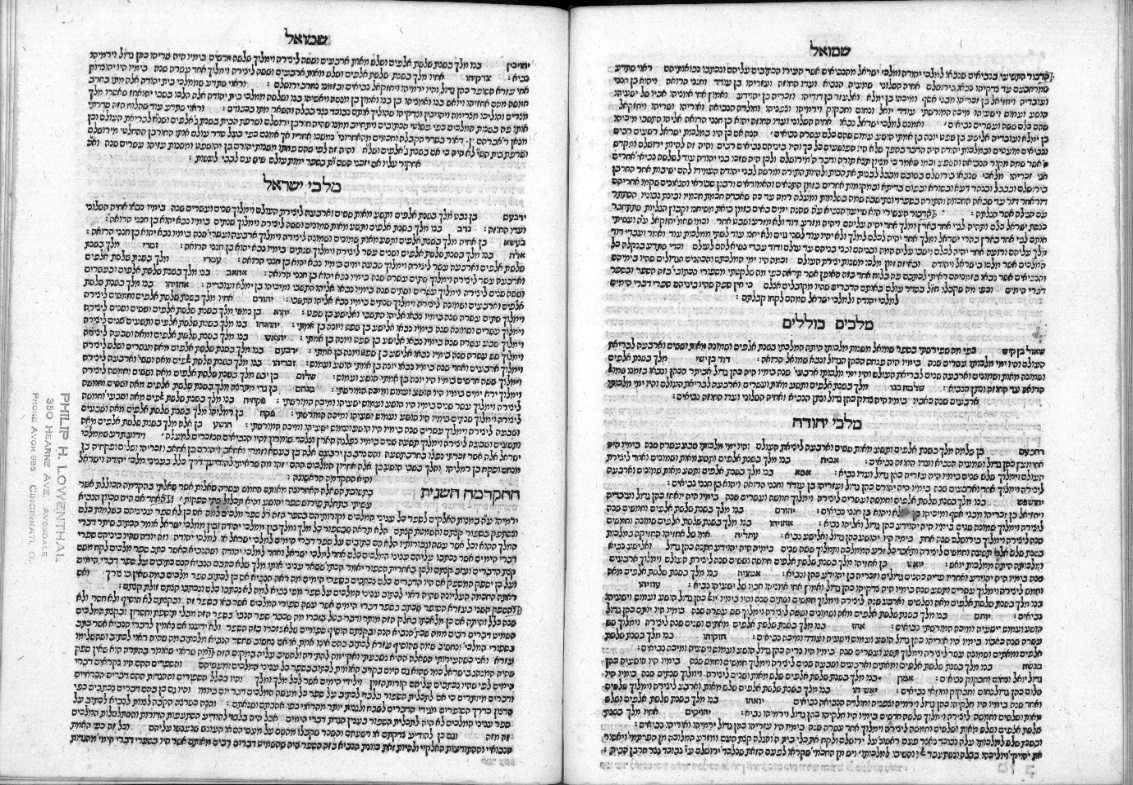
Having just related in the first person “the bitter and swift exile, and the destruction that devoured us when we were expelled from our settlement in Spain,”[[133]](#footnote-138) Abravanel proceeds to envision the entire history of biblical kingship as a process of division and decline, the deterioration of a unified kingdom (in which the general concerns of all tribes and subjects are cared for) into two divided entities, each one ruling over only part of the Hebrew people. The division was unequal. The Kingdom of Judah retained much of the religious ethos of the first kings, whereas the Kingdom of Israel devolved into idolatry and the pursuit of wicked particularistic concerns. The uneven process of division brought about an uneven pace of disintegration: the Kingdom of Israel disappeared much earlier than the Kingdom of Judah. Regardless, it was the very act of division that launched that irreversible process that ultimately ended in exile:

Behold we have learned from the histories of this book, that the children of Judah and Israel were all exiled due to their wicked actions… But indeed, not all were exiled at once, but rather at separate times. And just as the decay of natural, vital, and psychic powers [of the body] begins with the limbs farthest away from the heart and then proceeds to those closest to it, and the last to decay is the power of the heart, so too the first [to be exiled] of the Children of Israel were those [dwelling in] the Transjordan, who like limbs are farthest away from the heart. And after them were Samaria and its cities which were closer to the heart, and finally Jerusalem and the house of the Lord—the source of life and strength—were destroyed.[[134]](#footnote-139)

Abravanel’s insistence on a differentiated disintegration of the biblical kingdoms leads him to elaborate upon a progressive series of seven exiles from the remotest reaches of the land to its religious center. On the one hand, these seven exiles represent the progressive decay of the Hebrew people, compared here to a living organism. On the other hand, the series of exiles also represents a process of selection: the best parts of the organism are purified of their less perfect elements, producing “a continuous link according to nature and a straight line from father to son, without the interference of strangers.”[[135]](#footnote-140) Abravanel’s insistence on Judah’s pure genealogical line is naturally related to his own proud claims to Davidic lineage. Indeed he introduces himself at the beginning of his commentary with the following titles: “son of my lord, the great leader Judah Abravanel, from the seed of Jesse the Bethlehemite, from the house of David the prince.”[[136]](#footnote-141)

The kingdoms of Judah and Israel may have each had the same number of kings, nineteen by Abravanel’s reckoning. Yet only Judah demonstrated lengthy political and religious resilience and only it produced a large number of prophets. Moreover, only “the kings of Judah were scions of one man,” while the kings of Israel “were all from the different tribes according to fortune.”[[137]](#footnote-142) The exiles of the two kingdoms also diverged. “The people of [the kingdom] of Israel went into a distant exile” and “never returned to the land of Israel.” By contrast, “the people of Judah went to Babylon, Amon, Egypt, and other nearby countries,” and “returned [to the land of Israel] during the Second Temple [era].” As Abravanel explains, “the Torah was entrusted to the sons of Judah; after the destruction of Jerusalem, they established academies in Babylon, Nehardea, Sura, and Pumbedita and elsewhere during the period of the Tanaim, Amoraim, Savoraim, and Geonim… until wisdom, science, and Torah migrated to Iberia.” In his mapping of the processes of Jewish dispersion, Abravanel mentions several times the “splendor” of the Jews of Alexandria as another historical antecedent to the golden age of Iberian Jewry. They “disposed of so many riches and power and established themselves so much in Egypt that they did not want to return to the Land of Israel during the [era] of the Second Temple. […] The Iberian diaspora also did not return during the second Temple [era].” In the messianic era, “the assembly of Israel will be restored to its completeness, with one people and one king in the land of Israel.” But addressing the eras preceding that redemption Abravanel delineates a clear historical narrative: the Iberian diaspora is heir to the best remnant of the Hebrew past, the kingdom of Judah and its later offshoots in Babylon and Alexandria.[[138]](#footnote-143)

The progressive division of the general kingdom into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, is expressed visually in the *mise-en-page* of the printed edition of Abravanel’s introduction to his commentary. There the author presents his readers with a list of the general kings and the particular kings of Judah and Israel.



Abravanel, Commentary on Kings, Introduction, *editio princeps*, Pesaro, 1511-1512 (Soncino).

This table of the biblical kings was meant to convey visually an Aristotelian process of generation and corruption: a general kingship that culminates with the reign of King Solomon and then degenerates into two divided kingdoms each of which ultimately falls prey to dispersion and exile among neighboring kingdoms and empires. This transition from a perfect kingdom with significant imperial power during the kingship of Solomon to two vassal kingdoms and later to a state of exile preoccupies Abravanel throughout his commentary on the books of Kings. As I will show, the commentary begins by developing a positive, Jewish model of imperialism and then goes on to develop a notion of Jewish resilience with exile in alien empires. The combination of these two elements, the perfect Jewish emperor and the persistent decline of his kingdom, constitutes the first model Abravanel developed after 1492 in response to the course taken by the Iberian empires.

## The perfect kingship of Solomon: The empire

Abravanel’s long discussion of Solomon’s reign, which constitutes the bulk of his commentary on Kings, eloquently articulates the author’s shift from a positive view of contemporary empire-building to a negative one. Following the biblical narrative, Abravanel explains the first steps taken by Solomon in his attempts to secure his new kingship. This begins with a scholastic discussion of the nature of Solomonic wisdom (1 Kings 3). Abravanel explains that King Solomon, far more than just a skilled ruler, had miraculous access to perfect metaphysical, cosmological, and practical knowledge; unlike the normal scientist and philosopher, he was not required to engage in a lengthy and often defective process of induction. This presentation of Solomon as the pinnacle of epistemological perfection constitutes the heart of Abravanel’s understanding of the Solomonic kingship. Going far beyond the narration of political and diplomatic maneuvers in the first chapters of 1 Kings, Abravanel maintains that it was this miraculous access to epistemological perfection and superiority that made King Solomon the most accomplished of the three “general” kings of biblical Israel. Unlike his predecessors, Solomon was capable of ruling in accordance with a perfect, unmediated understanding of the general interest. Solomon’s epistemological superiority is, however, not limited to his seamless comprehension of the interest of a particular state and a particular people. On the contrary, the nature of Solomon’s wisdom transformed his otherwise local reign into one with imperial dimensions. People from all ends of the earth were attracted to his unique, universal knowledge:

It follows from what we have said that the inquiries of the philosophers were mostly insufficient inasmuch as separate intellects were concerned. In sharp contrast, Solomon apprehended the existence and true nature of the separate intellects, as much as is possible. He knew the differences between them, their hierarchic order in terms of their varying perfections and spiritualities, their number, and the number of their ranks. As a consequence, his superior knowledge entailed the knowledge of their nature, their power, and their rule over inferior beings… Apparently, King Solomon composed a great number of poems [dedicated] to these astral ministers. Each one was an independent poem adapted to one unique separate intellect, to [describing] the way it rules over a specific people among the nations and to its specific hierarchical position. In addition, [Solomon] composed the book of Song of Songs [to describe] God’s rule over Israel in particular… And this may be the reason why many persons hailing from different nations came to hear his wisdom and brought him tribute; they hoped that he would teach them the way according to which these people should worship their gods, [that is,] their celestial ministers, in order to draw down influx into their own land…[[139]](#footnote-144)

His perfect knowledge of the cosmological order, and especially the astrological status and function of each separate intellect, transformed Solomon’s otherwise local and fragile kingdom into a center of knowledge in which the proper course of action for each nation could be learned. Solomon is not only a universal ruler in the sense that he knows the correct practices and rules appropriate for each nation – his own rule, unlike that of other local regimes, proceeds from a clear conscience of God’s hierarchical rule on earth, expressed in the King’s many astral poems. Solomon’s articulation of a supreme cosmological science and his accurate knowledge of the relationship between astrological bodies and different regions constitutes, for Abravanel, the imperial nature of his kingship. Without the use of force, by dint of nothing but his superior knowledge, peoples and nations submitted themselves to Solomon willingly, finding in his wise rule the secret to better rule over their own lands. In the previously discussed narratives of Iberian expansion – the account of the capture of Arzila-Tanger and of Granada – military force, greed, bounty, slavery, expulsion, and many other power relations featured in Abravanel’s description of the machinations of empire. Solomon’s peaceful expansionism represents the mirror image of the violent expansionism of Iberian kingdoms.

Having presented this ideal image of Solomon’s epistemological superiority and universal rule, Abravanel goes on to discuss its imperial implications:

[Solomon] having been perfected in the highest possible degree in theoretical and practical matters – this affected his way of conducting himself according to the intellect and the perfection in matters of virtues and actions, i.e. ethics. It affected also the way a man conducts his household, his wife, sons, and slaves, i.e. economics. Finally, it affected his conduct of the state or rather the kings according to justice and law and the good administration, i.e. political science.[[140]](#footnote-145)

In the realm of ethics, Abravanel formulates the hypothesis, that “in order to learn his esoteric ethical wisdom, peoples from all ends of the earth came to him to hear his wisdom and brought him tribute of thanksgiving.”[[141]](#footnote-146) As alluded to many times, Solomon’s moral superiority inspires in individuals from all nations a natural sense of subjugation, which is attended by generous payments of tribute. As for the economic administration of Solomon’s kingdom, Abravanel insists on several occasions that Solomon had excellent organizational skills, reflected in the fact that the “subsistence of the royal house was of no prejudice for the prosperity of the people of the land in which he dwelt.”[[142]](#footnote-147) According to Abravanel, Solomon successfully divided the upkeep of his household among twelve administrative areas, a well-designed system that prevented inflation for the population. Moreover, he was able to accumulate a large number of horses and maintain a great army, which secured peace during his entire reign – projecting “glory and splendor,” but without actually needing to exercise force in practice. Solomon’s political perfection consisted also in the “invention of new and innovative ways of generating wealth and amassing large amounts of money without exacting it from his people.”[[143]](#footnote-148) The description of the economical virtues of Solomon is the moment chosen by Abravanel to reveal the imperialist background of Solomon’s perfect kingship. Solomon “would send ships to Ophir for gold and to Tarshish for large amounts of merchandise, and the amount of gold in [his] house was so great that he made two hundred suits of armor and three hundred shields.”[[144]](#footnote-149) Instead of “extracting [wealth] from his people,” Solomon extracted it from the riches of surrounding nations. The imperial nature of his kingship produced prosperity and perfection for king and subjects alike, coercive royal taxation being supplanted by free commerce and the voluntary subjugation of nations both near and far. Here again, Abravanel seems to propose the inverse of Portuguese imperial-commercial expansionism in the fifteenth century, which progressively became the sole means of strengthening the Portuguese crown while also benefitting the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.[[145]](#footnote-150)

Further developing the notion of Solomon’s unique physiognomic knowledge, Abravanel explains that he could also “perceive and know what was in the heart and mind of [any] man who stood before him.”[[146]](#footnote-151) Solomon used his “perfect knowledge in physiognomic matters for justice and the governing of kingdoms.”[[147]](#footnote-152) The use of the plural “kingdoms” is not an error, but rather the logical consequence of Abravanel’s line of thought. Since Solomon was able to divine the most secret thoughts of any man or woman, he could not only administer justice for his own subjects, but for all kingdoms on earth. Therefore, all nations and kingdoms submitted themselves voluntarily to Solomon’s perfect knowledge and brought riches to Solomon in exchange for his just and peaceful rule:

The perfection of Solomon’s rule of the kingdoms consisted in the fact that without using swords and spears, he ruled over all the kingdoms on earth and that all the nations would grant him gifts and serve him.[[148]](#footnote-153)

## The Queen of Sheba and the Emperor Solomon

The paradigmatic example of the miraculous transformation of Solomon’s rule into one of broad imperial domination is the story of Queen Sheba:

When Solomon sent his ship to Ophir, his servant disembarked there […] and told the people of the land about the virtues, greatness, and wisdom of Solomon. They explained that his qualities were miraculous since no natural norm could cause another man to reach such perfect knowledge! And when the Queen, who was in the same region of her kingdom, heard of Solomon’s divine reputation – that his affairs were divine – she decided that she wanted to test him with several riddles in order to determine if his wisdom was divine or natural…[[149]](#footnote-154)

The Queen of Sheba sought to test Solomon’s knowledge with “several riddles,” yet also brought with her “riches and goods… spices, gold, and many precious stones.”[[150]](#footnote-155) She brought, in other words, both the riches of her mind and the riches of her land. And when “Solomon interpreted […] the riddles exactly as they were in her heart and thoughts,” the Queen said to the King, “the rumors I heard were indeed true; […] the subjects who serve you are fortunate to hear your wisdom continuously.”[[151]](#footnote-156) After praising God for making Solomon the king of Israel “so that you can make justice according to your wisdom,” the Queen gave him “an offering… [of] a hundred and twenty talents of gold.”[[152]](#footnote-157) Elaborating on the biblical narrative of 1 Kings 10, Abravanel demonstrates how Solomon’s divine knowledge justified the submission of the Queen of Sheba and her huge tribute. Indeed, by his perfect intuitive knowledge of her most intimate “heart and thoughts,” Solomon demonstrated the universality of his kingship. He convinced her then that his rule was neither particular nor coercive but was rather dictated by his perfect knowledge of every person, nation, and set of circumstances. The gold and the precious stones rendered were therefore a natural and voluntary act of submission to imperial power.

Explaining the role played by the Queen of Sheba in the biblical narrative, Abravanel further writes: “having completed the story of the Queen of Saba, the biblical narrative returns to its earlier discussion, i.e. whence came Solomon’s wealth?”[[153]](#footnote-158) The Queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem following the arrival of Solomon’s commercial ships; upon completing her visit to Jerusalem, she “returned to her land when the ships of Solomon and his servants departed in that direction.”[[154]](#footnote-159) The Queen’s visit and her verification of the imperial nature of Solomon’s wisdom was a result of Solomon’s maritime commerce; it was the continuation of this commerce that allowed the diffusion of Solomon’s just, imperial rule into distant lands:

Because of her [the Queen of Sheba’s] love for Solomon, [her] whole land and region were offered to them [King Solomon’s agents] so that in one year, huge amounts of gold arrived [in Jerusalem] from that country and its queen.[[155]](#footnote-160)

Having explained the spread of King Solomon’s imperial fame and the concomitant economic benefits it accrued, Abravanel focuses on two verses—1 Kings 10:15 and 10:22,[[156]](#footnote-161)—using them to explain how the transformation of the Kingdom of Israel into an imperial power led to the ideal model of monarchic rule. Addressing the “merchants” (*tharim*) mentioned in 1 Kings 10:15, Abravanel discusses the different ways these foreign traders could increase the wealth of Solomon’s kingdom, freeing him from the need to raise taxes. Abravanel also discusses tariffs that Solomon could collect from the gold and products transported in these boats, “as the Christian and Muslim kings are doing.”[[157]](#footnote-162) He also mentions the possibility that these commercial trade boats belonged to vassal-kings and were sent with the express purpose of bringing gold to Solomon. Moreover, commercial boats could be added which had to pay a “rent” or “franchise” to the King. Abravanel synthetizes several interpretations of 1 Kings 10:15 into a cumulative understanding of Solomon’s trading activities. Besides Solomon’s own boats his ports also boasted foreign merchants under license and foreign “vassal” kings transporting tribute. “This proved that the entire wealth collected and accumulated by Solomon did not come from his subjects, since he did not exact [the cost] of the kingdom’s government and administration from them, but [rather] received [funds] from outside his kingdom, i.e. from the lands of the Gentiles.”[[158]](#footnote-163) The perfection of Solomon’s imperial kingship consisted in his capacity to shift the cost of his grandiose rule from his own people to the peoples of the empire.

Elaborating on “the ships of Tarshish” and “the ships of Hiram” mentioned in 1 Kings 10:11, Abravanel exerts no small amount of hermeneutical effort to distinguish between the Mediterranean trade with Tarshish, “the city called Carthage in the Antiquity and today its name is Tunis,” and the “African-Asiatic” trade with Ophir, which stands “at the end of the Land of Kush [Africa] near that part of the inhabited earth named Asia.”[[159]](#footnote-164) According to Abravanel’s reconstruction, “Solomon and Hiram built an association and company devoted to maritime trade [*shutfut vehevrah levhitasee besohorot hayamim*].”[[160]](#footnote-166) Solomon in other words involved himself in an existing trade route between Hiram and Tarshish. “Since Solomon seized Ezion Gever on the shores of the Red Sea […] he could send boats to Ophir […] and the ships of Hiram would sail to Ophir in cooperation with the ships of Solomon.”[[161]](#footnote-167) The cooperation of Hiram and Solomon in two maritime trade routes, Tarshish and Ophir, resulted in the lucrative imperial trade of precious goods such as gold, ivory, rare birds, pearls, corals, and spices. Abravanel further explains that “although a large stretch of land lies between the two seas [the Mediterranean and the Red Sea], and the passage from one sea to the other is only by land, the Nile River has two arms, one ending in the Red Sea and the other through Alexandria in the Mediterranean.”[[162]](#footnote-168) The two maritime trade routes could thus meet in the Nile Delta and thus every three years transport huge amounts of gold and exotic goods. Elaborating on the connection between wisdom and commerce in the biblical narrative, Abravanel concludes: “Beyond the perfection [Solomon] acquired from his wisdom, he also acquired immense wealth; it seems as if his wisdom was an instrument to obtain wealth.”[[163]](#footnote-169)

Abravanel’s rich depiction of Solomon’s imperial and commercial enterprises contrasts sharply with the types of policies pursued by 15th-century Portuguese monarchs in their exploration of the African coasts leading to India. Though they sometimes did grant monopolies or associated themselves with national or international merchants, who were then launching royal exploration missions, they were always careful to secure high taxation and revenues from treasure.[[164]](#footnote-170) In attributing to Solomon perfect commercial and imperial knowledge Abravanel not only marshals his general acquaintance with the Iberian monarchs, but his personal experience as well: the Abravanel family actively participated in the nascent Portuguese commerce with Africa and the Islands of Madeira in close collaboration with other Jewish, Italian, and Flemish merchant families. Thus, for instance, an official letter from the Royal Chancellery dated 1487 refers to the sugar business (*acuquar*) of the Abravanel family “in the island of Madeira.” The benefits confiscated by the King were so considerable that the Abravanel family received a letter of pardon even after they had participated in a plot against the King.[[165]](#footnote-171)

Abravanel was not only projecting his own experience from Portugal into the ideal biblical era of King Solomon. He intentionally omits from his narrative a central part of the nascent Portuguese commerce: the slave trade, an institution of which he was very much aware, as the case of Biccinai clearly shows. This omission like the earlier omission of a description of military force and violence further contributes to the idealization of King Solomon’s empire.

In this ideal image, Solomon is cast as a monarch endowed with perfect knowledge, who in exchange for sharing this knowledge receives voluntary submission and tribute from regional kings and grandees. He knows how to engage successfully in commercial enterprises and associations in the Mediterranean and Red Seas, extracting great wealth from his empire without needing to tax his own subjects or exploit his vassals. And finally, knowledge and wealth irradiate in the splendor of the newly built Jerusalem temple for God and palace for the king. This virtuous circle of perfections and benefits depicted with great care and detail in Abravanel’s commentary on 1 Kings 1-10, was meant to give meaning and prestige to the notion of a “general king,” a term coined in the introduction to the commentary. The generality of Solomon’s kingship did not consist only in his reign over all the tributes of Israel, but in its transformation into an empire reigning over the world. The central role played by knowledge and commerce in Abravanel’s model eliminates any notion of conquest or coercion – these are replaced by the acknowledgment of epistemic and religious superiority and shared economic interests. The attractiveness of Abravanel’s model of Solomon’s ideal empire was surely meant to contrast with the nature of Spanish and Portuguese empires in the making, whose violent nature and activities Abravanel knew and experienced firsthand, sometimes to his own benefit, but ultimately to his detriment.

## The desires of Solomon, his 1,000 wives, and the empire’s decline

If notions of conquest are absent from Abravanel’s elaboration of Solomon’s early reign, as described in 1 Kings 1-10, these feature prominently in his explanation of the decline of Solomon’s kingship (1 Kings 11). Building on the biblical passage “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods” (1 Kings 11:4) and its rabbinical interpretation (Shabbat 56b), Abravanel explicates Solomon’s “turn” or deviation from the ideal as follows:

The sin of Solomon consisted in the fact that he taught his wives the [astral-magical] rituals directed to the superior ministers [angels] responsible for each of the nations in order to bring down their influx on the different nations. Solomon was cherished by the Lord. Therefore, it was already sinful that he sought knowledge of these magic practices, and even more so that he taught these [practices] to his wives who had already converted and became Israelites…[[166]](#footnote-172)

In its heyday, Solomon’s empire had succeeded in subjugating neighboring and remote kingdoms without force but by the prestige of the King’s universal knowledge. This peaceful expansion featured prominently in the story of the Queen of Sheba who openly acknowledged King Solomon’s superiority. Searching for the causes for the decline of the Solomonic empire, Abravanel sheds light on the darker side of Solomon’s desire for subjugation:

Solomon was lustful and was a lover of women. It is the habit of kings that their wives, who sit at the forefront of the kingdom’s majesty and are called queens, partake of royal prestige and honor. But as for other wives, when kings have sex with them occasionally and in secret, neither importance nor attention is accorded to them. In contrast, it befitted Solomon’s grandeur and virtue that all the women with whom he had sex throughout his whole life were immediately isolated and separated. Nobody had the right to touch them [afterward] as it was [an affront to the] honor of the King who had slept with them… Maybe Solomon did what Ahasuerus did, summoning many virgins to see which young woman would fit the King’s taste. After he slept with one after the other in order to select sixty women to be queens, he selected eighty to be his concubines and to serve the king. He would sleep with these women as many times as he pleased. As for the rest of the princesses and concubines – he did not know them another time after the first intercourse, since these women did not fit his taste, and this was the reason for their separation and seclusion…[[167]](#footnote-173)

Solomon’s lust knew no limit, as his imperial domination over near and distant kingdoms. In sharp contrast to the model of ascendancy by divine perfect knowledge, Solomon’s unbounded desire for young, foreign wives demonstrates his subjugation to his baser drives, his need to satisfy his own selfish pleasures – the foil to a “general reign” guided by a perfect knowledge of the common interest of the people. Abravanel vividly describes the erotic selection process of Solomon’s queens and concubines as well as the relegation of hundreds of women to a secluded status, “forbidden for all men as sacred tools.”[[168]](#footnote-174)

This description is not merely a curiosity. It opens a broader account of the decline of Solomon’s empire and later the kingdom itself. Ironically Solomon’s sexual lust is a consequence of his universal power, a power that allows him to select young wives from all over the world. This transition from the general to the particular initiates a process of decline which begins with the children whom Solomon bore from his one thousand wives. “There is no doubt,” writes Abravanel, “that in regard to his virtue in terms of wisdom and grandeur, Solomon did not have sons who could have succeeded him – [they did not excel] in perfections of the imagination [social and political virtues] or in perfections of the soul [knowledge and science], since all of them tended in their nature to resemble their mother.”[[169]](#footnote-175) The division of Solomon’s empire was thus the result not only of his incapacity to bequeath his virtues to any one of his sons but also from his incapacity to impede “the deviation of [his wives’] heart… towards other gods.” Moreover, Solomon “gave them tacit authorization to carry out idolatrous rituals and was willing to overlook them.”[[170]](#footnote-176) In his youth, Solomon was able to attract all the neighboring and foreign kingdoms to submit to his divine and universal knowledge. Yet, this imperial edifice began to crumble due to his particular will – his lust – and even more due to his sons and wives who gradually detached themselves from their former submission to Solomon’s divine rule and religion:

Since Solomon did not contest his wives and sons for their idolatrous cult to the servants [of God] and to the whole host of the heavens, the [divine] punishment was as follows: just as [his wives and sons had] rendered service to God’s servants – the moon, the sun, and other servants – deposing God, the King of Kings, from his kingship, therefore God would tear the kingdom away, taking it away from Solomon and handing it over to one of his servants.[[171]](#footnote-177)

Following the religious insubordination of Solomon’s wives and sons, Abravanel elaborates on the three political adversaries whom God appoints to contest Solomon’s rule: Hadad the Edomite, Rezon the son of Eliadah, and Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kings 11:14-41). “Just as there were in Solomon’s houses and palaces many gods, abominations worshiped by his wives, so God raised against him enemies from different sorts.”[[172]](#footnote-178) These three enemies revived ancient hatred against the kings and leaders of Israel and their desire for vengeance against Solomon marked the end of the universal and harmonious allegiance to his imperial kingship. Moreover, it presaged the future division of Solomon’s kingdom.

## The victory of the particular over the general

For Abravanel, the final sign of the decline and decomposition of Solomon’s empire was the following episode:

In his old age, Solomon exacted taxes from his people. […] This is an astonishing fact, since during the building of the Temple and the palaces, a time of great expenses, he did not raise taxes from his people. [Why then did] he impose taxes on his people later, when [these projects had been] completed and there was no longer need for great expenditures? Perhaps he had [ceased to send] ships to Ophir and Tarshish, and thus he was forced to raise taxes from his people to sustain his royal administration and status according to his prestige and his former habits, to pay for the wars he waged in his old age against those enemies whom God appointed against him. […] This shows that much of his wealth has been dissipated in his old age.[[173]](#footnote-179)

The circle was thus complete. Solomon raised his empire to epistemic, commercial, and political heights, liberating his subject from the ravages of war and taxes, freely extracting infinite riches from vassal kingdoms. Yet his lust for women ultimately spelled the end of his empire, detracting from the generality and perfection that had once characterized it; now particular interest progressively tore down the empire and the kingdom, reducing he who was once a divinely inspired emperor to a mere monarch raising taxes and waging wars.

The motif of heavy taxation reappears in Abravanel’s interpretation of the division of Solomon´s kingdom between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Elaborating on 1 Kings 12:4 (“Your father made our yoke heavy; now therefore, lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you”), Abravanel insists that the reference is to the “yoke [of taxes] with which Solomon burdened the entire people to maintain the upkeep of his household.”[[174]](#footnote-180) This time, no mention is made of the imperial solution devised by Solomon – his former strategy of funding his munificent policies with the funds drawn from vassal kingdoms. On the contrary, Abravanel now elaborates on Rehoboam’s desire to increase his father’s yoke, leading to a natural outcome – revolt:

[T]hus, with his harsh words, he transformed the Israelites into animals without the capacity for reason. He like his father would continue to ride upon them. This proves that his father did much wrong against his people and that he had intended to perpetuate this sin. Who could hear such a thing without revolting?[[175]](#footnote-181)

The division of the kingdom between Rehoboam and Jeroboam was an additional symptom of the strengthening of particular interests – the feature which had already characterized Solomon’s later rule. In this instance, however, the particular interest reared its head in particularly brutal fashion, without the divine check of prophecy or divine wisdom to enlighten the young king about the dictates of the general interest. The very same notion of privileging the particular interest over the general is used by Abravanel to explain the religious policy pursued by Jeroboam:

[*Jeroboam made shrines*], this is the story of what Jeroboam did in order to prevent the people from going to Jerusalem. He built two shrines on high places upon which to offer sacrifices, one in Bethel and one in Dan. *He appointed priests etc. and he ordained a feast etc*. This means that he built a house of worship in Dan. Unlike in the Temple of Jerusalem, there was not one altar, but many. *He drew priests from every class of people* – this means from all the people except the tribe of the Levi. He thought that kingdom and the priesthood are similar in the sense that all the kings were from the seed of David and all the priests from the seed of Aaron. Therefore, he intended to eradicate both lineages. Just as he uprooted kingship from the seed of David, so too he thought it fitting to uproot the priesthood from the seed of Aaron…[[176]](#footnote-182)

With Rehoboam and Jeroboam, the crown and religion of Israel lost their universal significance. They were now debased to the rank of institutions in the particular service of kings.

## The decline of Judah and Israel: Exile and subjection to foreign empires

“The Lord will raise up for Himself a king over Israel who shall cut off the house of Jeroboam…For the Lord will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land.” (1 Kings 14:14-15:) The rabbinical hermeneutical principle of measure for measure (*midah keneged midah*) serves Abravanel to interpret this prophecy delivered against Jeroboam and the Kingdom of Israel:

Since Israel sinned in accordance with Jeroboam and was lured by him like a people with neither root nor being whatsoever [*am she-ein bo shoresh ve-qiyum klal*], therefore their punishment shall be to move like a reed in the water, which sways from side to side with almost no cause until eventually, God will restore them to the Land of Israel. Their punishment is measure for measure. As they abandoned the Lord Who exists, residing firmly in his Temple, and instead sought after vanities […] [therefore] the Lord will displace them from their land and send them to a foreign soil.[[177]](#footnote-183)

The exile of Israel is the proper measure or punishment against “a people with neither root nor being,” that is, a people lured by its king. It is simply a reflection, via dispersion and exile, of the inner religious and natural degeneration of the people.

Dealing with the sins of King Rehoboam and the Kingdom of Judah, and the subsequent invasion by King Shishak of Egypt, Abravanel offers an interesting elaboration of the entailing imperial consequences:

Why did King Shishak come up against Jerusalem? The reason for his hatred is not stated in Scripture. It seems that Shishak had harbored love for Jeroboam ever since [the latter] found refuge with him in Egypt. [Therefore,] he came up against Jerusalem to help Jeroboam. In Chronicles, it is written that King Shishak came with “twelve hundred chariots, sixty thousand horsemen, and people without number who came with him out of Egypt—the Lubim and the Sukkiim and the Ethiopians.” He conquered the fortified cities of Judah and he arrived at Jerusalem. The people of Judah finally repented. “The word of the Lord came to Shemaiah, saying, ‘They have humbled themselves; therefore, I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance. My wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak. Nevertheless, they will be his servants, that they may distinguish My service from the service of the kingdoms of the nations.’” This too was in accordance with the principle of *measure for measure*. They chose other gods and worshipped them; they combined worship of the Lord in the Temple – His house – and worship of the other gods in their different altars. [Therefore,] their just punishment was to know both the service of the Lord and the service of earthly kings who raised arms against them.[[178]](#footnote-184)

Abravanel elucidates how the territories of the Kingdom of Judah shrunk while its former vassals expanded – vassals who became powerful contenders for supremacy in the region, even forging an alliance with the Kingdom of Israel. Analyzing the biblical narratives of Kingsand Chronicles, he delineates the transition from a period of imperialism and monotheism to a period of division and dual allegiance to both the God of Israel and the gods of neighboring powers. These parallel processes of shrinking, division, and dual allegiance inverted the former state of imperial superiority; now the Jewish kingdoms would submit to historical powers and empires, ultimately culminating in the long exile of both Israel and Judah. Yet this process of submission to other empires did not spell the end of Davidic kingship; it merely suspended it until the advent of the Messiah. This suspension is compared by Abravanel to an eclipse in accordance with Psalms 89:

This is like the sun and the moon; they shine by themselves, and if at times they are eclipsed by the earth, this is not due to a diminution of the light of the stars themselves. The same holds true for the lineage of David which is always predisposed for kingship provided it is not eclipsed by the behavior of a people who play the same role as the earth [in eclipsing the sun and the moon].[[179]](#footnote-185)

Abravanel continues, “the days in which Israel dwelt in its land, which Psalms 89 compares to adolescence, were few; the days of exile, however, were many and are compared to old age and death.”[[180]](#footnote-186) Unlike the ephemeral eclipse of the sun and the moon, the eclipse of the Davidic kingship is not a short suspension of a divine promise, but a long cycle “in the midst of the nations,” between the general and united rule of David and Solomon and the “general kingship which will be restored to the house of David” in messianic times.

## Exile: God’s new role in history

In his commentary on 2 Kings 17-25, Abravanel develops a detailed and nuanced description of the destruction first of Israel and then of Judah, as well as a discussion of their exile and survival within ancient empires. His running commentary on the biblical narrative offers many insights, discussions, and narratives, which are meant to transcend and expand upon the biblical depiction. Abravanel’s point of departure is the biblical link between idolatry (*avodah zarah*) and exile: “They [sons of Israel] caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger.Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight” (2 Kings 17:16-17). At the end of the biblical description of Israel’s idolatry in 2 Kings 17, Abravanel inserts a long examination of the various types of idolatry. Expanding upon the three basic categories formulated by Nachmanides (the worship of separate intellects, the worship of stars, and the worship of spirits),[[181]](#footnote-187) Abravanel defines a total of ten categories, concluding that “out of the ten types, the latter eight are […] things distant from truth and intellect; only the first and second types pertain to the separate intellects and the stars which have in and of themselves some reality.”[[182]](#footnote-188) Yet he qualifies that “their worship is folly […] since the forces of the separate intellects and the stars are determined and cannot but achieve their predetermined goal.”[[183]](#footnote-189) Although neither intellects nor stars can “change their role or deeds,” Israel chose to submit themselves to these intermediaries, or to other completely fictitious entities, while still acknowledging that “the greatest force and absolute power belongs to the supreme God.” Such an inversion of the theological hierarchy between a supreme deity and His natural intermediaries is interpreted by Abravanel in terms of political idolatry, the erroneous worship of an earthly power:

The eighth type of idolatry is the worship that men rendered to victorious Caesars and kings who conquered many lands. They would say [that such feats] could not have been accomplished [had such figures] not possessed divine power. Therefore, they would make statues in the likeness [of these figures] and bow down before them. They said that God had placed them on earth in His stead.[[184]](#footnote-190)

Abravanel further illuminates the new situation inaugurated by the Assyrian exile of Israel and their replacement in Samaria by foreign peoples. Discussing the biblical account of God sending lions to attack the new settlers, Abravanel developed a detailed understanding of the nature of dual religious allegiances. The new gentile settlers in the land of Israel learned the Jewish religion from an exiled priest of Israel, sent back, especially for the purpose of teaching them “how they should fear the Lord” (2 Kings 17:28). However, they continued to worship “their foreign gods and [also] carried out their idolatrous cult in the shrines used by the Samaritans, sons of Israel, since they were living on their lands.”[[185]](#footnote-191) As for the former population of the Kingdom of Israel – “in their exile in Babylonia […] they did not fear the Lord and worshipped statues like the Assyrians.”[[186]](#footnote-192) The situation of exile (from and in Israel) thus resulted in a general rise of religious syncretism in which adherents acknowledged both the existence of the first cause (God) and maintained a “belief in intermediary beings.” God’s rule was no longer carried out through direct rule over His people and land, but rather through indirect and distorted control through intermediaries, intellects, stars, and emperors.

The complexity of God’s rule over the remaining Hebrew kingdom – Judah – and the neighboring empires and kingdoms is analyzed in great detail by Abravanel in his commentary on 2 Kings 18-20. There Abravanel stresses the biblical juxtaposition of the distinct fates of the kings of Israel and Judah, Hoshea and Hezekiah respectively, at the beginning of 2 Kings 18. Abravanel develops this juxtaposition, drawing a sharp contrast between the triad of Israel-God-Assyria and that of Judah-God-Assyria. Whereas the religious sins of King Hoshea and his people prompted God to allow the Assyrians to conquer Israel and exile its population, “the religious merit of Hezekiah protected his towns and people.”[[187]](#footnote-193) Sennacherib could not repeat in the Kingdom of Judah what his predecessor Shalmaneser had done in the kingdom of Israel. Abravanel’s commentary on the biblical story of King Hezekiah explores the extent to which proper religious conduct could prompt God to change Judah’s political fate vis-à-vis the Assyrian Empire. King Hezekiah’s purity saved his kingdom from the fate suffered by the Kingdom of Israel, yet it did not prevent him from begging for mercy from the Assyrian Emperor and “gathering all the money in the Temple and in his treasury in order to give it to Sennacherib.”[[188]](#footnote-194) Yet Abravanel is very sensitive to the following contradiction: “if Hezekiah was good to the Lord […] why did these hardships befall him?” Abravanel’s answer is as follows: “The expedition of Sennacherib was a punishment for the sinners of Israel among the sons of Judah who rejected Hezekiah’s kingship.”[[189]](#footnote-195) The religious merit of a good king can postpone or moderate the punishments exacted for the sins of the people, but not prevent them completely.

Having discussed the religious merits of individuals and the collective sins of the people, Abravanel interprets the biblical account of Rabshakeh’s speech to the people of Jerusalem, developing it into an internal Jewish debate as to whether one should “go to King Sennacherib and accept his kingship” or place trust in King Hezekiah. Rabshakeh mocks those who do the latter, be it based on the promise of support from Egypt, belief in the strength of Hezekiah’s men, or the hope for Divine Providence. Abravanel seriously considers the possibility that Rabshakeh is “a Jewish apostate.” “He might even have heard Isaiah prophesizing ‘behold, the Lord brings up over them the waters of the river, strong and mighty, the king of Assyria and all his glory’ [Isaiah 8:7].”[[190]](#footnote-196) Rabshakeh is a liminal figure, navigating between creeds – “an apostate who believes in the divinity” – and yet tries to convince the Judeans to surrender to the Assyrian king. Commenting on the verse “a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine” (2 Kings 18:32) a depiction of Assyria with which Rabshakeh hopes to entice the Judaean defenders, Abravanel demonstrates his understanding of Assyrian politics:

This is what the King of Assyrian did to all the peoples he conquered. He drove them out of their lands and transferred them to other cities while bringing peoples from his land to settle in Israel in the place of the exiles. This is what he did with the ten tribes from the cities of Samaria. This way, he moved and mixed nations while distancing them from the help of their compatriots and drawing them closer to him and his people so that the [exiles] could no longer rebel against him.[[191]](#footnote-197)

The imperial politics of the Assyrian kings, which the Jewish apostate Rabshakeh serves and defends, exposes the remaining people of Judah to the greater threat of dispersion and extinction as a people and religion. Abravanel scrutinizes 2 Kings 19:1-19 to find the biblical solution to such a threat. After comparing this menacing state of hardship to the situation of “a pregnant woman seized by the pangs [of birth],”[[192]](#footnote-198) a state of extreme vulnerability, from which “we lack the strength to escape without God’s help,” Abravanel comments on God’s words reported by Isaiah “I will send a spirit upon him” (2 Kings 19:7). First, “it means that what you saw of Sennacherib’s force and bravery in all his wars as well as his desire to conquer Jerusalem, all this is from Me [God].”[[193]](#footnote-199) The second meaning relates to the fact that God diverted Sennacherib by means of a threat posed by the King of Ethiopia. Moreover, the Assyrian king would later be stricken by a sudden plague and finally meet his death upon his return to his land:

Since Sennacherib called himself a great king, Hezekiah said [to God] “You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth” […]. Sennacherib’s superior strength is only the natural effect of his huge army, whereas the Lord can miraculously cause him to retreat.[[194]](#footnote-200)

In this moment of extreme vulnerability, Hezekiah rediscovers, according to Abravanel, the unique association between the actions of a righteous Jewish leader and God’s direct intervention in world politics. This link secures the survival of Judah, limiting the strength of the Assyrian monarch via miraculous divine power. God protects the existence of his people by checking the power of kings and emperors instead of ruling over Judah directly. To convey this transformation, Abravanel paraphrases and comments upon the biblical metaphor “I will put My hook in your nose” (2 Kings 19:28): “I will show you that I am the Lord and the ruler and that you are the slave, the beast or the fish which the hand of man can lead or bring out of the water.”[[195]](#footnote-201) The notion that God controls the balance of power between the Assyrian Empire and Israel finds a typical expression in the story of Sennacherib’s death:

Our sages said [Tanhuma *Vayiqra* 8] that Sennacherib asked, “by what merit does God struggle on behalf of His people?” His sages told him, “Abraham, their father, brought his son as a sacrifice.” Sennacherib said, “I will also sacrifice my two sons to Him.” When his sons heard of this, they killed him while he was bowing down before his god.[[196]](#footnote-202)

Instead of subjugating the Kingdom of Judah to his empire, Sennacherib learned at his own peril that his own power is controlled by a God committed to the survival of His people. Politically, the Kingdom of Judah was nothing more than a vassal state in precipitous decline; yet the survival of the people of Judea was vouchsafed by a God carefully watching over the balance of empires and kingdoms.

Abravanel’s remaining commentary on the biblical story of Hezekiah concentrates on the nature of Divine Providence in exile. Commenting on 2 Kings 20:1 (“In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death”), Abravanel insists that the fatal sickness of Hezekiah did not take place after the invasion and threat of Sennacherib, but in parallel, “at the same time.”[[197]](#footnote-203) That Sennacherib’s invasion and Hezekiah’s illness were concurrent was not mere happenstance. It was “caused by Divine Providence since Hezekiah was unmarried, and [these events] were meant to prevent the delay of producing the lineage of David.[[198]](#footnote-204)” Like the exile of Israel and the invasion of Sennacherib, the deadly illness of Hezekiah was intended to provoke contrition and repentance, as expressed in Hezekiah’s famous prayer: “Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart” (2 Kings 20:3). Hezekiah miraculously recovered, “since God knows the generations in advance and saw […] that although Menashe [the son of Hezekiah] would be wicked […] and his son Amon likewise, [nevertheless] from him would issue Josiah – and there never would be a king among Israel like him, so just in the eyes of the Lord.”[[199]](#footnote-205) If the miracle secured the continuity of the Davidic line for the duration of the Kingdom of Judah’s remaining history, it could not avert the inexorable march toward destruction and exile:

When Hezekiah saw and heard the coming hardship and the evil situation which awaited his people, he regretted greatly that he had prayed to the Lord to cure him and he disdained the years he had received; for death would have been better than a life in which he would witness the evil that awaited [his people]. [Indeed,] the Philosopher [Aristotle] has noted that death is preferable to a life plagued by shame and dishonor.[[200]](#footnote-206)

Hezekiah’s lesson was different from that of Sennacherib. Whereas Sennacherib was taught that even a successful emperor is but an instrument in the hand of God, Hezekiah learned that though his religious merits had postponed God’s punishment and “given time to his people to repent,” this did not change the fact that “the destruction of Jerusalem was a secret decision of God, sealed in his innermost chambers.”[[201]](#footnote-207) The story of Hezekiah, as it is interpreted by Abravanel, demonstrates the King’s understanding of the process of exile and destruction:

The children of Judah and Israel were all exiled because of their wicked actions. . . but indeed, not all were exiled at once, but rather at separate times. And it is akin to the decay of natural, vital, and psychic powers which begins with the limbs furthest away from the heart and then proceeds to those closest to it, and the last to decay is the power of the heart.[[202]](#footnote-208)

Hezekiah’s and later Josiah’s merits succeeded in postponing the exile of Judah by one hundred and fourteen years. The two monarchs impeded the complete and immediate collapse of the organism by providing time and incentive for the better part of the collective to repent and change their ways. Thus, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah disintegrated gradually, being incorporated in stages into the empires of the Medes and Babylon, while an elite, regularly driven to action by the terrible fate of their brethren, maintained its allegiance to God and his Torah and even managed to prosper in exile:

And you should know that kings and magnates of the rulers of the gentiles had already come with the king of Babylon to Jerusalem and led the Jews to their lands, and among them was Pyrrhus who was the king of Sepharad. [...] And he was present at the destruction of the First Temple, and brought from Jerusalem members of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Simon, and Levites and priests, many persons who willingly came with him.[[203]](#footnote-209)

The historical persistence of the aristocratic elite of the Jewish people was the other face of Abravanel’s ideal model of the perfect Jewish emperor (King Solomon). Israel had prospered under Solomon’s reign which had been blessed by divine providence and knowledge. Then during the long eclipse of God’s providence, reflected in the game of earthly and celestial powers, only a limited elitist lineage manages to last the centuries. Be it at the helm of great empires or scattered among them, Israel is eternal and is vouchsafed redemption.

## A second model: The messianic annihilation of world empires

The entry of the Jews into a long history of exile within the bounds of rising and falling empires is the central preoccupation of a later commentary penned by Abravanel, *Ma‘ayanei hayesh‘uah* (*The* *Wells of Salvation*). Abravanel completed the work only four years (1497) after completing the commentary on Kings. The years 1493 to 1497 were tumultuous ones in the Italian peninsula. They witnessed the beginning of the infamous Italian wars which were to involve the major powers of Europe for over fifty years; in the meantime war between the Ottoman Empire and Venice raged intermittently. In his introduction to the 1551 Ferrara edition of Abravanel’s work, the printers situate the writing of *Wells of Salvation* after the expulsion of 1492 and the arrival of the Abravanel family in “the praised city of Naples, in the year ‘for you were foreigners’ (Deut 10.19) 1492-5253.” But they insist also that the commentary was written after “the wrath of King Charles [of France] who went to war on behalf of the [Kingdom] of Naples,” provoking “the flight of Abravanel together with King Fernandino to Messina,” resulting in his lonesome exile in the island of Corfu until he arrived finally “in the city of refuge, Monopoli.” “In the year ‘Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy’ [1497]. he wrote the book the Wells of Salvation.”[[204]](#footnote-210) The recurring expulsions and persecutions experienced by Abravanel and his fellow Sephardic exiles called for a broader interpretation of Jewish life in the Diaspora. And indeed, *The* *Wells of Salvation* proposed a monumental elucidation of the concept of exile through a messianic lens: the interpretation of the prophetic dreams and visions narrated in the book of Daniel. This messianic elucidation of exile entailed a second model of Jewish imperial positioning.

Abravanel opens his book with an introductory piece written in rhymed prose that delineates the historical, geographical, and theological circumstances of the Land of Israel throughout history. The first paragraph begins with a fragment of Deut. 32:8: “When the Most High gave nations their inheritance,” immediately juxtaposed to Psalms 83:6 “the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites.”

A page of a book

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

The remainder of the paragraph elaborates upon this image in full:

He set up boundaries for the peoples, the land of the seven peoples [the Land of Israel] sometimes being in the hands of the Edomites [Christians], ram skins dyed red, causing great devastation, from the royal family and the nobility, and sometimes being in the hands of the Ishmaelites [Muslims], Assyrians, Letushim, and Leummim, numerous warriors, all dumb dogs that cannot bark, sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber…[[205]](#footnote-211)

During Jewish exile, God grants the great nations of Christianity and Islam historical successes, submitting His dispersed people and His land to the successive domination of Christian and Moslem powers. The exilic condition thus inverts the original division of the peoples and lands evoked in Deut. 32:8 (“When the Most High gave nations their inheritance”), a time when Israel was the Lord’s favorite portion. If in his commentary on the books of Kings, Abravanel described a long process of national decomposition, culminating in Israel’s exilic existence within empires, in his commentary of Daniel, he focuses on the next stage – the long exilic history of the Jewish people among foreign kingdoms, culminating in redemption:

As before the entry into the land of Israel, God made… Moses announce and prophesize the successes and misfortunes of Israel, so when they were about to leave their land for exile, God decided to announce [to Daniel] all the exiles and all the misfortunes that awaited them.[[206]](#footnote-212)

The book of Daniel, written at the beginning of the exile, is a prophetic text which anticipates the full course of a tumultuous exilic history. Moreover, it attests that “even when God punishes Israel for its deeds, God wants to signify to them that the evil befalling them is neither a material necessity nor the result of astrological influence or happenstance.”[[207]](#footnote-213) Forced into expulsions and exiles with his Sephardic coreligionists, Abravanel rereads Daniel’s anticipatory visions of Jewish exile “among the four kingdoms” and transforms them a posteriori into a realistic historical world-narrative of Jewish survival between the eastern and western empires. For Abravanel, Daniel’s dreams and visions distinguish themselves in their visual anticipation of all the stages of Jewish exile until the redemption. These prophetic visions are not the imaginative visualization of a cosmological hierarchy, transmitting divine perfection to matter, as developed by Maimonides in the first chapters of part III of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, but anticipative historical knowledge, which will be converted into the real history of Israel’s exile among the world powers.

Interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s prophetic dream of the statue in Daniel 2, Abravanel adopts the conventional interpretation: the four kingdoms depicted are Babylonia, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. His innovation lies in noting that the fourth empire was later divided into two branches, Christianity and Islam. Therefore, neither of these religious powers can claim to embody the fifth eternal kingdom mentioned at the end of the prophecy. Resisting the Christian interpretation of the fifth kingdom as a reference to Jesus and the Church, Abravanel develops an astonishing counterargument:

The [Christian interpretation] conforms neither to Scripture nor to sound judgment since each of the empires mentioned by Daniel corresponds to a different nation and people in different lands… Thus, the first empire is Babylon, its people the Chaldeans and its land Babylon and all the lands of the Chaldeans; the second empire is Persia and Media and it related to the same peoples, the Persians and the Medes. Their lands are known to belong to the Asian continent in the direction of the Orient. The third empire was Greece, and the Hellenes and their lands and region are known to be situated at the beginning of Europe. The fourth empire was Rome and its people are well known, the Kutim, and its lands and regions are in Italy which also belongs to the part of Europe. And since the Scripture indicates [the rise of a] fifth kingdom, it is necessary that it be similar to the previous ones, i.e. that it belong to a people different from the previous ones and that its lands be different from the lands of the previous kingdoms. All [of these conditions] hold true for the people of Israel…[[208]](#footnote-214)

Abravanel thus identifies symmetry in the history of world empires. If the first two were situated in Asia, and the last two in Europe, the fifth and last kingdom can neither be Christian nor Moslem, since “in the nation of the Kingdom of Rome, Christians and Muslims later received [their] two religions, and therefore, the religions of Jesus and Muhammad were already included in the fourth kingdom.”[[209]](#footnote-215) As a consequence of this argument – and this is the entire historical-theological thrust of *The Wells* –Israel is a people situated between Asia and Europe, exiled within the eastern and then western Empires. Israel, however, will replace these powers, constituting the fifth and final kingdom of the messianic age.

Toward the end of *The Wells,* Abravanel paints a frightening picture: the end of the divided imperial hegemony of the East and the West. Elaborating upon Daniel 11:40-12:2, Abravanel developed his vision for the end of the fourth kingdom – a clash between its two parts, the kingdoms of Christendom on the one hand and the Ottoman Empire on the other:

Will the Ishmaelites come to the lands of the Christians? I have devoted much thought to this issue over the course of many days. And now I shall tell you what I believe in this matter. God will inspire in the hearts of the Christian people the desire to pass over and conquer the lands of the Ishmaelites, especially the Land of Israel, [to capture] the tomb of their God. Indeed, most of the lands now in the hands of the Turks […] first belonged to the Christians, the Ishmaelites gaining them only afterward. Therefore, [the Christians] will desire to acquire them, especially when they will see that the Jews have reunited. And they will choose a leader, and filled with anger, they will enter these lands and conquer them. And they will deliver a harsh blow to the Ishmaelites, with sword, sowing killing and destruction. Then, the Ishmaelites will gather and wage war against the Christians in Jerusalem. […] They will kill and annihilate them. It is thus that the simultaneous fall of Christianity and Islam will transpire. From this mutual destruction, the Messiah will appear. The Sages accepted the view that first, the Messiah son of Ephraim will come and fight together with the nations heading for Jerusalem. There he will be killed in the war. Afterward, the Messiah son of David will appear and kill all the enemies…[[210]](#footnote-216)

Abravanel here adapts his knowledge of the expansionist policy of the Iberian kingdoms in the second half of the 15th century into a messianic narrative. Spurred in part by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Iberian Kings engaged in failed crusading expeditions against the rising Ottoman Empire, but soon abandoned direct military confrontation. Instead, they chose new targets: Africa and Andalusia, and discovered new roads to India and America, redefining the notion of a crusade and offering new avenues for the diffusion of the Christian faith. Abravanel lived through this historical transformation of Iberian Christian expansionism. Having undergone the expulsion of 1492, the Italian wars, and the Venetian-Ottoman conflicts, he maintained that western expansion was driven by a messianic plan – one that served the Jews, of course. As a consequence, he tended to reduce the nature of Christian expansionism to the consciousness and rhetoric of crusade that accompanied Portuguese and Spanish military and maritime expeditions.

Abravanel envisions that “the Christian will arrive at the shores of Jaffa and to the wells now called Beirut and to other places nearby to penetrate the Land of Israel.”[[211]](#footnote-217) Basing himself on Daniel 11:43 (“He shall have power […] over all the precious things of Egypt; also the Libyans and Ethiopians shall follow at his heels”), he insists that with their base in the Land of Israel “the Christian will plunder lands near and far”[[212]](#footnote-218) The expansion of Iberian Kingdoms into distant lands was for Abravanel (as well as for many Christians) preparation for the eventual reconquest of Jerusalem. Such a messianic recasting of Iberian expansion was meant to bring it into a clash with the other imperial power in the East, the Ottomans. “Asia, when this wicked kingdom shall hear about the [invasion] of the [Christian] foes, shall go out in anger in order to destroy them.”[[213]](#footnote-219) Abravanel compulsively indulges in fantasies regarding the mutual destruction of the Asian Muslims and the Western Christians, insisting especially on “the end of the Kingdom of Rome” and on the execution of divine punishment. The Angel Michael “will then continue to speak in Israel’s favor, as is his good habit, and he will ask from the Lord [to be allowed to exact] vengeance for his people.” After “the destruction of the Christians by the Ishmaelites, they shall conquer the Christian lands and reach Rome and destroy it.”[[214]](#footnote-220) Abravanel invests much energy in imagining the destruction of Christendom by its Islamic other, claiming that “out of this vengeance, the Messiah will appear.” Interpreting the prophecies of Ezekiel and various rabbinical sayings, Abravanel insists that redemption “comes just after the revenge.”[[215]](#footnote-221) Edom and Ishmael alternately ruled the land of Israel and profaned it, therefore “they will do to each other what they both did to Israel.”[[216]](#footnote-222) Then, Israel, the land and people situated in-between Asia and Europe will be liberated from the yoke of eastern and western Empires alike. By imagining this apocalyptic cross-annihilation of the empires and the parallel ingathering of Israel, Abravanel completed his transition from an attitude of collaboration with Iberian empires into a messianic approach that acknowledges the historical importance of contemporary expanding empires, yet lays the significance of these developments in their destruction.

Both the model of the perfect Jewish emperor and his aristocratic lineage as well as the messianic model of the mutual annihilation of world empires were developed by Abravanel after the expulsion of 1492. Both were developed to overcome the new Sephardic position of exteriority vis-à-vis Iberian expansion. The first model transformed the Sephardic exiles into the heirs of a perfect and ancient world empire, devoid of the vices and violence that characterized the Iberian kingdoms of the present. The second model cast Israel as the future heir of the fifth messianic kingdom after the western and eastern empires had destroyed each other. The past and future empires of the Jews compensated psychologically for the Sephardic fall from grace and their loss of imperial agency.

# Chapter 6: Jewish elitism in the midst of conflicting empires

In the year 1498, Abravanel, then living in the Venetian port city of Monopoli in the Puglia region, completed another ambitious messianic project: *Mashmi‘ah yesh‘uah* (Announcer of Salvation). That same year, Vasco de Gama reached the shores of India. Almost a year earlier, the explorer had left the Portuguese Kingdom soon after King Manuel I had ordered the mass conversion of the Jews. In many respects, this conjunction of events repeated the events of 1492 – a year marked by the expulsion and conversion of the Jews as well as the groundbreaking, maritime voyage of Christopher Columbus. This combination of expulsion and imperial expansion featured in Abravanel’s first writings after 1492, but only insofar as the *Reconquista* of Granada was concerned. As explained at the end of the previous chapter, Abravanel believed that the historical processes taking place after 1492 would ultimately lead to a clash between the Ottoman and the Christian empires. Obsessed by a messianic scenario of revenge, focused squarely on the old world, Abravanel neglected the new historical implications of European maritime expansion in the Americas and in India. Yet, as will be seen in this chapter, this denial of the new Iberian discoveries began to give way in the first years of the 16th century to new attitudes and ideas, from which Abravanel was able to formulate yet another type of Jewish positioning vis-à-vis the Iberian empires.

## Conflicting attitudes

In his *Announcer of Salvation*, an awareness of the novelty of the Iberian discoveries begins for the first time to manifest. This awareness appears alongside Abravanel’s earlier narrative revolving around an apocalyptic war between Edom and Ishmael. Explaining Isaiah 18:1-2 (“Woe to the land shadowed with buzzing wings, which is beyond the rivers of Kush, which sends ambassadors by sea…”), Abravanel begins to elaborate upon the significance of Portuguese expansion along the shores of Africa:

At the time of the ingathering of the exiles from the ends of the earth, men will hear of the miraculous triumph of Israel, and they will send ambassadors by ship through the seas to announce to Israel [the exiles] and establish a friendship with them since they will fear that otherwise, they might receive the same punishment [inflicted upon] Sanahiv… Therefore, they will eagerly send forth messengers to a land designated by the name “the land shadowed with buzzing wings.” [The reason for this name] is that most of the shadows in this land come from great trees on the riverbanks, as testified by men of the Portuguese Kingdom who have been there. There travel is always by river. And on both banks of the river there are tall trees [reaching] to the sky with many branches and leaves casting long, large, shadows on the rivers. The boats of the Christians sail through these rivers under these shadows which cover the watercourse like wings. This is the reason why this land is called “the land shadowed with buzzing wings.” This refers to the rivers “beyond the rivers of Kush [Ethiopia].” […] The prophet Isaiah spoke as if calling them from afar: “Woe to the land shadowed with buzzing wings,” since in these [messianic] times, they will send envoys by sea. […] They will send them by “vessels of reeds” which are the boats of these lands… We have learned from hearsay that on the shores of these rivers, very tall and very thick reeds grow. The people of this land will take a reed, carve it out, and make it into a boat that can hold four or five persons. They call these boats “madias” in their language. And this is the practice in all the land of Kush [Africa]… The prophet says that the envoys should be told [as follows:] “go, swift messengers,” which means go easily to the people of Israel… It is possible that they will send these swift messengers to accompany the people of Israel who were exiled to their lands, bringing them back to the Land of Israel. And the verse “go, swift messengers” means go and bring a people “pulled and torned,” the Jewish diaspora among them, and conduct them to “an awesome nation,” Israel dwelling in their own land.[[217]](#footnote-223)

This long passage is at odds with the overarching narrative pursued throughout *Announcer of Salvation* and in Abravanel’s earlier writings, which do not take into consideration the new processes of maritime expansion inaugurated by Colombus, de Gama, and their predecessors. In this rare text, Abravanel uses his knowledge of the Portuguese maritime expeditions to imagine the paving of new routes to forgotten and distant Jewish exiles in preparation for the approaching day of the ingathering of the exiles. Iberian maritime expansion has prepared the communication routes and facilities necessary to prepare the way for Israel’s redemption.

However, the main narrativein *Mashmi‘ah yesh‘uah* runs in the opposite direction:

In the lands of Savoy, Provence, Piedmont, Lombardia, in all the kingdoms of Spain, Sardinia, Sicily, Russia, the lands which the [Holy Roman] Emperor inherited from his father, Portugal, Naples, Florence, and some lands belonging to the Venetians, they expelled the Jews and their outstretched arm is upon the conversos to expel them from their countries [of exile]. And I believe according to the Lord that [the [present age] will last until […] the year 5264 (1503-1504).[[218]](#footnote-224)

The secret messianic reason for these impressive series of expulsions and persecutions was to bring Jews and conversos out of their exilic lands as much as possible by the year 1503-1504 which should mark the beginning of the redemption. This new exodus of Jews and conversos in the late 15th century was conceived by Abravanel as a transfer from west to east. Commenting on Isaiah 11:14, Abravanel writes:

How will the exiles estranged far away reach the Land of Israel? Especially the ones in the west from the islands of the sea. Of this, it is written, “they shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines” (Isaiah 11:14). […] it means that the exiles from afar will arrive swiftly to the Land of Israel by the sea, on the wings of the Philistines, a parable to designate the ships of the Genovese and Venetians, originally from the seed of the Philistines. They will bring Israel from west to the east by way of ships on the ocean and together they shall plunder the Orientals there.[[219]](#footnote-225)

Abravanel was keen to perceive the unity tying together the local expulsions and persecutions of Jews in late Medieval Europe. He was also willing to integrate them into his messianic vision ‏of an apocalyptic clash of empires and a miraculous ingathering of the exiles. The turbulent years 1498-1503 in the Italian peninsula and the Mediterranean served to fuel Abravanel’s messianic reveries. Yet, they reduced his understanding of the Iberian maritime expansion to a prelude for religious and political conflict between Christian and Muslim powers in the Mediterranean.

## Knowledge and denial of the new maritime routes to India

In the last years of the 15th century, Abravanel was obviously not alone in this confused perception of the global changes taking place. The confusion of Abravanel was due to the expulsion and the Italian wars which displaced him from Iberia and Naples but resulted also from his tendency to search for a messianic resolution for the conflicts then raging. The historical significance of the maritime expeditions of the Portuguese and the Spaniards to India and the Americas was not initially acknowledged in Venice or elsewhere in the Italian peninsula.[[220]](#footnote-226) As early as 1499, the Venetians had received news about the Portuguese fleet reaching Calicut. Girolamo Priuli, a Venetian merchant, wrote in his diary in August 1499:

Letters arrived from Alexandria, from the month of June, relating how via other letters from Cairo written by men arriving from India, they heard that three caravels of the Portuguese King had arrived in Calicut and in Aden [!] in India. The Portuguese king sent them to search for the islands of the spices and Columbus [!] was the leader of these caravels… This news and these events appear to me of greatest importance if they are true. But I do not place my trust in them. [*pero io non li presto autenticha fede*].[[221]](#footnote-228)

In February 1500, clearly perturbed by Turkish naval victories in the summer of 1499, Priuli added the following entry in his diary: “None of the powers in the world makes the Venetian Signori feel insecure, but the Turkish power does.”[[222]](#footnote-229) The defeats at Lepanto, Coron, and Modon (1499-1500) led Venice to lose its supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean in favor of the Ottoman empire.[[223]](#footnote-230) At the turn of the century, commerce with the East having come to an almost complete standstill, Venice came to appreciate the challenge that the Portuguese Empire posed. Venice sent an ambassador, Domenico Pisano, to Lisbon in order to enlist the aid of King Manuel I in a maritime war against the Turks.[[224]](#footnote-231) The ambassador’s speech celebrated the “*antiqua amicia di quella Serenissima caxa di Portogallo con la Signoria nostra,*” but also depicted the “danger for the Christians” (*pericula christianorum*) and the “damage inflicted by the Turk on our state” (*il danno fa il turcho al stado nostro*).[[225]](#footnote-232) The ambassador’s words, however, reached the ears of a king already deeply involved in “the affairs of Africa (*l’impresa di Africha*) for which his subjects participate without asking for money.” In exchange for a campaign against the Turks, however, his subjects “would ask for money” (*vorianno danari*). The ambassador also reported, “thirteen caravels sent a year ago by the King of Portugal to Calicut for spices.”[[226]](#footnote-233) The caravels of Alvaro Cabral, who discovered Brazil on his way to India, were about to return to Lisbon. And “in Lisbon, they rejoiced over having found the route of the spices (*la via di le specie*). From it will proceed great benefits.” (*sequira gran beneficio*). In a letter King Manuel addressed to Venice, he added to his earlier title “King of Portugal and the Algarves on this side and beyond the sea of Africa, Lord of Guinea” the new epithets “[lord] of conquest, navigation, and commerce with Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India” (*dominus […] conquestae, navigationis ac commercii Ethiopiae, Arabiae, Persiae atque Indiae*). The diverging interests of Portugal (their sights set on the Atlantic) and Venice (their sights set on the eastern Mediterranean) led the first Venetian ambassador to miscalculate the circumstances of his mission. A second ambassador, Pietro Pasqualigo, would be sent to Lisbon a few months later, in many ways playing out the same scenario as his predecessor. Venice thanked King Manuel for his willingness to send warships to support the Venetians in their war against the Ottomans. The ambassador then devoted much of his speech to King Manuel’s maritime discoveries:

What kingdom is there on earth, what nation so remote and so far removed from commerce with all men, that has not been reached by your fame? In this brief time, a world of other lands entirely unknown to Ptolemy and to Strabo and to the rest of the world’s writers has been discovered and made known to men through your diligence and under your direction. […] That which neither the Carthaginians of old achieved, nor the Romans who held the power after the overthrow of Carthage, nor Alexander, that great world explorer, nor all of the Greece in the days when she flourished, nor the Egyptians and Assyrian kings, your excellence and good fortune have achieved. At your command, the whole coastline of outer Lybia, from the Atlantic Ocean as far as the Barbarian Gulf which is joined to the Rea Sea, has been navigated. […] What is greatest and most memorable of all you have brought together under your command peoples whom nature divides [*discretas naturae imperio gentes*] and with your commerce you have joined two different worlds [*duosque diversos terrarum orbes commercio consosciati*].[[227]](#footnote-234)

Pasqualigo’s *captatio benevolentiae* recounting Manuel’s exceptional imperial achievements was, however, meant to lead into an *a fortiori* argument on behalf of aid to Venice:

A fair thing it is […] to have crossed a great part of the ocean by ship, to have explored shores and lands, and to have gained unknown people and islands for the commerce of our men. But a fairer thing it is, far more splendid and more promising for the immortality of your name, to defend the most noble part of the world from the fury of the infidels, to fight to protect the common faith, repel the danger that threatens Christendom and extinguish the flame that threatens us all.[[228]](#footnote-235)

Contrasting commerce with religion, and the particular interest of a kingdom with the general interest of Christendom, the Venetian ambassador tried to convince King Manuel to take a leading role in the Christian military response to the Ottoman threat. This argument sheds light on the difficulty some Europeans had in grasping the gravity of the global changes inherent in the rise of new Iberian empires – an attitude already encountered in Abravanel’s intense focus on the Christian-Muslim confrontation in the Mediterranean. Pasqualigo thus vacillates between acknowledging the significance and novelty of the Portuguese empire and disparaging it by comparing it to the far more important task of defending Christian Europe.

Following the successful return of Cabral in 1501, Pasqualigo discovered that King Manuel planned to bring back to Lisbon “*la armata sua in Levante*” in order to invest all his ships in the development of his commercial empire. Moreover, the king and his entourage believed that within a short time, “the Venetian galleys will receive their spices [from Lisbon].”[[229]](#footnote-236) Portugal not only abandoned Venice in its confrontation with the Turks; it invested its whole maritime fleet in replacing the Serenissima as the main European supplier of spices. By April 1502, the second Venetian ambassador in Portugal left Lisbon. By December of that same year, Venetian merchant Girolamo Priuli reported that “letters from Valencia, Genoa, Lyon, and Bruges […] all concur in confirming […] the arrival of four caravels returning from the journey to Calicut.”[[230]](#footnote-237) Priuli describes the Venetians as being “shocked and in bad mood, since the Portuguese expeditions [to India] were ongoing and since the journey to India could now be considered very easy.”[[231]](#footnote-238)

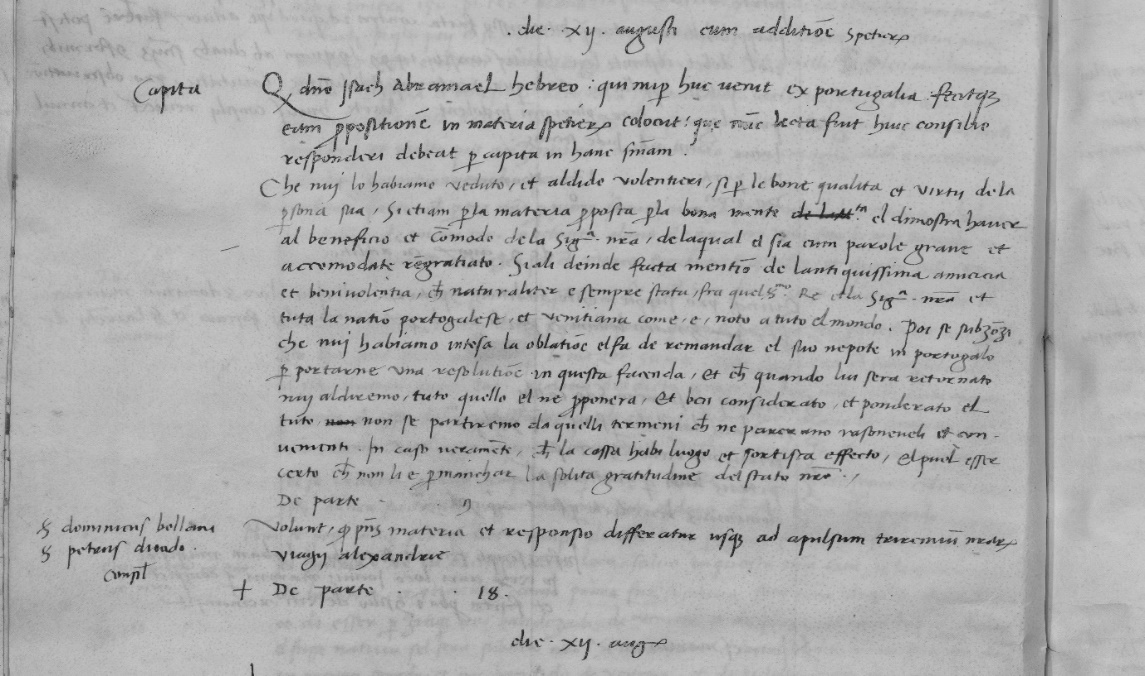
In the following year, 1503, Priuli lamented the fact that “at the fair of the Germans very little business was done.” He adds bitterly: “if the Germans do not want to buy [spices], it is all because of the Portuguese caravels.”[[232]](#footnote-239) Priuli also describes the tense expectation of reports about the Portuguese vessels. Finally, in October, he reports several letters confirming the return of 15 caravels filled with spices:

The news of the arrival of these caravels provoked in Lisbon and throughout Spain [!] great festivities; in sharp contrast, in Venice, it spread the greatest melancholy and worry. Many thought that the city of Venice was ruined by this [new] route [to India] since it would now lose the commerce of the spices and maritime travel, which feed and support the Venetian republic.[[233]](#footnote-240)

## Jews and the Portuguese-Indian Empire

The year 1503 was not only crucial in terms of the shift of the commercial and strategic balance between Lisbon and Venice. The Portuguese were busy translating their successful maritime expeditions to India into imperial control over the shores of Africa, India, and Brazil; Venice, by contrast, was forced to reach a compromise with the Ottomans and had lost many of its commercial ties with Cairo.[[234]](#footnote-241) In his messianic works written in the late 1490s, Abravanel had calculated that the year 1503 would mark the beginning of redemption and would see the outbreak of the apocalyptic war between Edom and Ishmael. In actual fact, 1503 was the year in which the sixty-six-year-old Abravanel and his second son Don Joseph would settle in Venice. “It was his intention,” explains his early biographer Barukh Forti, “to affect a compromise between the Doges of Venice and the current King of Portugal in matters pertaining to the spice trade.”[[235]](#footnote-242) The archives of the Venetian Republic have conserved an official summary of the meeting that took place between Abravanel and the Doges:

Regarding Don Isaac Abravanel a Jew who recently came here from Portugal and made a proposal concerning the affairs of the spices of Calicut, which was read by the present council who responded as follows:

We saw and heard him with pleasure, be it due to the quality and virtue of his person, be it due to the matters he proposed and the good spirit he demonstrated [in his attempts to] benefit and comfort our Signoria [Venice] – to which he expressed his gratitude with serious and appropriate words. He was reminded of the most ancient friendship between the excellent King of Portugal and our Signoria, and between the Portuguese and the Venetian nations, as is well-known throughout the world. Afterward, we heard the offer he made – that he would send his nephew to Portugal to submit there a solution of his own concerning these affairs [the spice trade]. Upon his return, we shall listen to what he has to propose. And after having considered and weighed all the aspects of the proposition, we shall not deviate from the terms which seem reasonable and convenient to us. If this should really transpire and have a successful outcome, he [Abravanel] can be certain, that the gratitude of our state shall not fail him.[[236]](#footnote-243)

This document sheds complex light on Abravanel’s negotiation with the Doges. It shows an ex-Portuguese Court Jew proposing his former expertise in Portuguese commerce and expansionist policy to a new state in which he had found shelter – a state embroiled in unprecedented rivalry with Portugal. Abravanel promises to effect a solution to the growing conflict of interest between these two maritime powers. As discussed earlier, the expulsion of 1492 had removed Abravanel from Iberian politics. This external position and the ensuing resentment it provoked are particularly visible in his apocalyptic vision of empires bringing about their own destruction. In contrast, the arrival of Abravanel in Venice marks a return to involvement in the affairs of the Iberian empires. Regardless, Abravanel’s undertaking did not succeed, as can be deduced from a later document issued by the Council of Ten. The same council which had authorized Abravanel’s mission decided just a year later to send another agent in his stead. Leonardo Ca’ Masser was sent to Lisbon, but this time “as a private person, a simple merchant without revealing to anyone that he had been sent by our Signoria.”[[237]](#footnote-244) The secret mission of Ca’ Masser was described as follows: “your pain and effort shall be, not to rely on information offered by others, but to see with your own eyes and to understand how many ships returned or will return […] from their journey to India.”[[238]](#footnote-245) This spy was immediately denounced and put in prison.[[239]](#footnote-246) He eventually was able to secure his release and in subsequent years informed Venice about the ongoing Portuguese expeditions to India.

In his account of the first expedition of Vasco de Gama, Ca’ Masser notes the role played by a Jew in his expedition:

After a short time, a Moor with a cross in his hand boarded our ships in order to understand the origin of our expedition. A captain came on board. His name was Gaspar. Born in Germany, he was a Jew who became a Moor. He was living there in Calicut. Since he was learned in several languages, he had been sent by the King of Calicut to understand who these people were [the Portuguese]… Just after he came aboard, the captain [Vasco de Gama], seeing that he knew Italian and had great expertise of these lands, imprisoned him. He was put in irons… By force of blows, Gaspar told the truth to the captain and spoke everything he knew about all the ports and places on this coast of India. [[240]](#footnote-247)

De Gama returned to Lisbon with the convert named Gaspar. He used him to convince King Manuel that there was a “very abundant quantity” of valuable spices in India. We read further that “in Lisbon, the Jew named Gaspar converted to Christianity […] and [has now] married a Portuguese native of the city.” He even received from the King “170 ducats of yearly revenue… for having provided such [valuable] information about India.” On the basis of the good information he received from Vasco de Gama and the convert Gaspar, King Manuel “decided to send a fleet to [once again accomplish] this journey [to India].” According to Ca’ Messer, Gaspar embarked with Cabral in his famous voyage which would lead him to discover Brazil before reaching India again.[[241]](#footnote-248)

The rest of Ca’ Messer’s letter abounds in descriptions of the shipment of spices. It also depicts the hostilities encountered by the Portuguese and the progressive building of a series of “fortalezas” along the African route to India and on the shores of India itself. These fortresses were soon to constitute the new commercial empire of King Manuel.[[242]](#footnote-249) Ca’ Messer concludes his report with the following statement:

I see that this route [to India] shall not cease to be traversed, but on the contrary, it shall be continuously frequented and stabilized. Without a doubt, the most reverent king shall dominate this route, above all on the sea, since the Indians are not able to prevent this [Portuguese] navigation, and cannot resist the ships and artillery of this most serene King…[[243]](#footnote-250)

Ca’ Messer qualifies this statement about Portuguese maritime superiority, noting that “the opinion of this most serene King to prevent the Moors from navigating to India via Mecca and the Red Sea, seems to me impossible.”[[244]](#footnote-251) Yet for him, the Portuguese King “shall receive easily 25 percent of all future trade with India.” To these lucrative gains, Ca’ Messer adds “the treasure that he gained from the new Christians who exit the kingdom,”[[245]](#footnote-252) “from the gold mine of Guinea … every year, one hundred and twenty thousand ducats,” and “from the adjudication of the blacks who enter this city [Lisbon] – 2,000 heads worth 5,000 ducats.”[[246]](#footnote-253)

## A sense of shared superiority with the European empires

Abravanel like other Venetian ambassadors sent to Lisbon failed to reach an agreement with King Manuel I. Nevertheless, the fact that Abravanel joined the list of the Venetian agents dealing with the Portuguese monarchy seems to support the idea that he was well informed of the new discoveries being made by the Portuguese and the Spanish crowns. As a Sephardic leader, he had to confront the puzzling fact that these two Iberian Kingdoms were growing into successful maritime empires even after they had expelled and forcibly converted their local Jewish populations. As seen earlier, Abravanel had already begun to confront this historical and religious challenge in his works written after 1492. He began by depicting the successful imperial reign of King Solomon which did not resort to military force and coercion. Then in the midst of the Italian wars (after 1494), he developed a messianic vision of a clash of empires in and around the Mediterranean basin. After arriving in Venice in 1503, Abravanel was initiated into the far-reaching changes that Portugal’s and Spain’s new Atlantic expansion introduced into European and Middle Eastern politics. It is therefore worthwhile to examine if Abravanel’s Venetian writings bear witness to a certain evolution of his thought vis-à-vis the new Iberian Empires. Abravanel’s commentary of Genesis (1505), surely one of his major literary achievements during his Venetian period, devotes considerable efforts to depicting the genealogical process which brought about the constitution and evolution of the major regional groupings or races composing humanity: Asia, Africa, and Europe. His interpretation of the biblical narratives of Noah and the Tower of Babel encapsulates much of his new concept of the historical articulation of nations and Jews.

Pondering the fates of Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 9:18-19), Abravanel comments upon the biblical statement “from these the whole earth was populated” as follows:

Although they were brothers, they dispersed themselves over the whole earth and divided it between themselves. You know that the ancient sages divided the earth into three parts. The first is Asia and it begins from the Land of Israel and continues all the way to the east. This part was taken by Shem… The second is called Africa and it came to be the part of Ham. And the third part is Europe and it became the part of Japheth…[[247]](#footnote-254)

The dispersion and division of the earth between the sons of Noah was no innocent deed. It completed Noah’s natural rule over the “whole earth and all its parties,” and brought an end to a major feature of human society: its agrarian character. Abravanel describes Noah’s perfect agricultural knowledge, which allowed him to cultivate vines and finally indulge in wine. The sin of Ham and Canaan mocking their naked father offers Abravanel an opportunity to advance a series of causes that led to the dispersion of Noah’s sons and to formulate a hierarchy of races:

Ham’s part in the sin was him not fearing for the honor of his father and not covering him with a garment; Canaan’s part in the sin was to see Noah’s nudity and to speak about it as something amusing… When this rumor reached the ears of Shem and Japheth, they did what was morally expected of them for the honor of their father, i.e. to cover him with a garment.[[248]](#footnote-255)

Abravanel explicates the difference between the behavior of Ham and Canaan on the one hand and that of Shem and Japhet on the other, defending the proximity and superiority of the latter:

Noah saw through the holy spirit the just fate that awaited Canaan: servitude, submission, and expulsion from his land. Therefore, he cursed him vis-à-vis his brothers… saying “Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants, he shall be to his brethren” (Gen. 9:24)… his curse being his enslavement to Shem and Japheth. And this matter relates in my opinion to the possibility that Noah saw that God, may He be blessed, would give the land [of Canaan] to the descendants of Shem, and to the seed of Abraham in particular. He also saw that at a later time, God would expand the seed of Japhet, the Romans in particular, until they would reach and conquer the land of Canaan – and after them, the sons of Kedar [Arabs], who belong also to the seed of Japhet, would rule over the land. He saw also that even further in the future, God would again rejoice for good over Israel who belong to the seed of Shem and they would rule again over the land of Canaan as in the beginning. And [during all this long history], Canaan would always be slaves to them [the seed of Shem and Japheth] and would never be delivered…[[249]](#footnote-256)

In opposition to the eternal slavery of Canaan, Abravanel paints a historical picture of races and powers in which Shem and Japheth, Israel, Rome, and the Arabs rule in succession over the land and people of Canaan, thus demonstrating a certain shared sense of superiority. Contrary to Abravanel’s previous messianic writings, the succession of the powers after the Exile of Israel and Judah is not framed here in terms of the apocalyptic self-destruction of Christian and Muslim Empires. Rather, the main thrust of Abravanel’s discussion is to reinforce the elitist nature of the Jews and to contrast them with the sons of Canaan who were also subjugated and expelled from their land by foreign nations, but remained, unlike Israel, in perpetual slavery and dispersion.

Abravanel goes on to connect this cycle of domination over Canaan to the anthropological constitution of man composed of three parts: the animal, the political, and the intellectual. Each of Noah’s sons, and each one of their progeny is connected exclusively to one of these three dimensions of human life. “From Ham come Cush and Egypt and Phot and Canaan all of whom to this day are ugly in appearance, dark in form as a raven, awash in lust and drawn to animal pleasure, lacking intelligence and knowledge and statesmanship…”[[250]](#footnote-257) The enslavement of Canaan, and more broadly the enslavement of all the children of Ham, is justified by their preponderance of bestial characteristics and their lack of political and intellectual qualities, the latter characterizing the sons of Japheth and Shem. Such a negative attitude toward black Africans cannot be separated from the growing diffusion of the slave trade in Europe and from the self-perception of superiority it produced among Europeans. Abravanel’s harsh evaluation in 1505 seems to go far beyond the exotic presentation of the slave girl Biccinai in his 1472 letter to Yehiel.

Abravanel expresses undisguised admiration for the sons of Japheth, the Greeks, and the Romans, “How beautiful are the deeds of this nation, their conduct, their politics, the manner of their rule and their prowess?!” These political virtues are reflected, according to Abravanel, in their “beauty and in the beauty of their appearance, whiter than milk.”[[251]](#footnote-258) The sons of Shem are presented as the inventors of the sciences: mathematics, physics, and metaphysics. The superiority of Japheth and Shem over Ham is both political and epistemological. Moreover, Abravanel mentions here various legends about the transmission of sciences from the sons of Shem to the Greeks and Romans, strengthening in this way the affinities between the two superior races. “Ibn Rushd in his book *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* claims toward the end that Al-Ghazali wrote: ‘the Greeks and the Romans stole their wisdom from the sons of Israel.’”[[252]](#footnote-259) Abravanel refers most probably to the following passage:

The learned who were instructing the people in Alexandria became Muslims when Islam reached them, and the learned in the Roman Empire became Christians when the religion of Jesus was introduced there. And nobody doubts that among the Israelites there were many learned men, and this is apparent from the books which are found amongst the Israelites and which are attributed to Solomon.[[253]](#footnote-260)

Ibn Rushd delineates a chain of epistemological transmission (Israelites, Christians, and Muslims) in parallel to the succession of empires (Solomon, Romans, and the early Islamic empire). In Abravanel’s understanding, the Israelites, the Greco-Romans, and later the Christians and Muslims, not only succeeded each other in dominating the land of Canaan, and the world; they also transmitted knowledge, building their historical superiority upon their moral and religious capacity to discern right from wrong, their political capacity to build states and administer justice, and their intellectual capacity to arrive at the truth in theology and various sciences.

The story of Noah’s son served Abravanel to defend a certain elitist affinity between Jews and the scions of the Greeks and Romans. Abravanel’s commentary on the story of Babel, however, articulates Jewish distinction and superiority among the major nations:

Since the iniquity of the generation of the deluge was very acute, including violence, robbery, and corruption, they deserved annihilation. In contrast, the circumstances of the generation of Babel were different; their sin did not reach the same extremes, and no similar corruption was concretely found among them. They had only begun to build the city, which would necessarily have brought them to such sins. Therefore, their punishment was only that God confused the language of the entire earth and scattered them elsewhere… This punishment was well measured. Before the construction of Babel, this generation was one people on earth living in natural and original union. [However,] their minds and thoughts did not suffice with this. [Instead,] they decided to make an artificial society and union within a political community and to construct artificial things. Therefore, they were deprived of the natural union that they had once enjoyed. And this was accomplished by the confusion of their language, since the sharing of the same language is a cause in establishing society and [cultivating] love among its members. And the diversity of languages is a cause for their scattering and division. Thus, they did not succeed in building the political community they intended to create in the city of Babel and instead were scattered elsewhere.[[254]](#footnote-261)

The difference between the generations of the deluge and Babel lies in both time and degree of sin. In the first instance, humanity sinned and immediately was erased; in the second instance, a long process of technical development, state-building, and national diversification had begun, later bringing with it many sins. This model of political and technological expansion over the earth not only describes the generation of Babel. It also describes the political issues in which Abravanel was immersed since his arrival in Venice: Portuguese imperial expansion and its repercussions for the old world. Diverging from his messianic visions of empires destroying each other, Abravanel proposed at the end of his life a complex articulation of political expansion and Jewish persistence:

During the generation of Babel, there were just and good people such as Noah, Shem, Eber, and Abraham who did not follow the counsel of the wicked and did not tread the path of sin, and remained within the pure and natural fold of mankind and sufficed themselves with that which nature offered, while still occupying themselves with divine wisdom and speaking the holy tongue without losing it or adulterating it as done by their contemporaries. Therefore, Divine Providence did not abandon them; God separated the just ones faithful to Him, Abraham and his seed, to be the perfect people among the peoples.[[255]](#footnote-262)

Abravanel continues: “Noah had three sons, and within ten generations, they were all deprived of human perfection, true knowledge, and the holy tongue – these perfections remained only in Abraham.”[[256]](#footnote-263) In the midst of human expansion and transformation, the Jewish progeny of Abraham maintained their superiority not by political success and dominion, a destiny reserved for the descendants of Japheth, but by their natural and epistemological steadfastness, which safeguarded them and made them attractive to European powers. Abravanel’s final model of imperial positioning was one of Jewish elitism. Contrary to the other models that he devised after 1492, it did not rely on a glorious ancient past or a cataclysmic messianic future. It relied only on the natural theological qualities inherent in Israel and transmitted from one generation to the next. It was these qualities that allowed them to span the timelines of empires and of human expansions and conquests while remaining always the secret to the march of history.

# Epilogue

From the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 to the discoveries of the Americas and the forging of new routes to India at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Portugal and Castile had transformed themselves from marginal, unstable Christian monarchies into leading imperial powers with territories and influence spanning four continents (Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas). This local and global transformation is commonly acknowledged as a seminal shaping force of modernity – the inauguration of centuries of European empire-building. No historical moment encapsulates so powerfully and so tragically the internal and external change unfolding than the year 1492, in which *Reconquista,* expulsion,and imperial maritime expansion were juxtaposed over the course of just a few months. On January 2, the Catholic Monarchs seized the last Muslim stronghold in the peninsula. On March 30, they signed the edict of expulsion. On April 17, they signed the capitulations with Columbus, who in turn, launched his voyage to the “Indies” in August. The intricacy of a crusade waged against infidels as well as imperial and commercial expansion defined the nascent Spanish and Portuguese empires through processes of internal consolidation as well as a projection into new spaces and populations. As these processes developed in the Iberian Peninsula over the course of the fifteenth century, Jewish participation became virtually impossible; only the complex veil of conversion would allow such participation. Jews lost their position as associates to the builders of empires, becoming the targets of expulsion, forced conversion, and the investigations of the Inquisition.

The life and thought of Don Isaac Abravanel, as discussed in previous chapters, exemplify the shifting Jewish positioning vis-à-vis Iberian empire building. At an early stage in Abravanel’s career, it was expressed in the form of collaboration; after 1492 at least three answers rooted in the imagination are offered: the image of a perfect Jewish emperor (King Solomon) and his faithful descendants; the messianic fantasy of empires destroying each other; and the formulation of a Jewish elitist consciousness. Abravanel’s soul teetered between revenge and elitism, between dreams of a near-apocalyptic clash of crusading empires, and an elitist notion of Israel as a unique divine remnant outliving a history of rising and falling empires. Each attitude corresponded to one of the two faces of nascent Iberian empires: the ideal of religious crusade on the one hand and the practicality of commercial-political expansion on the other. This ambivalent consciousness offered some consolation; for a Jewish leader and merchant like Abravanel, it was also a means of adapting his life and pondering the evolving imperial configurations in the west and east.

Similar searches for adaptation or consolation rise time and time again over the course of the entangled history of modern empires and the Jewish people, for example in *the Star of Redemption* (1919). About four hundred years after Abravanel’s thought and writings, soldier and philosopher Franz Rosenzweig emerged from his previous illusions that German-Jewish collaboration could lead to the rise of a victorious German Reich in World War I. Seeking consolation, he too turned to a sense of Jewish elitism.

All worldly history is about expansion. Power is therefore the fundamental concept of history, because in Christianity Revelation has begun to spread over the world, and so all will for expansion, even the consciously and only purely worldly expansion, has become the unconscious servant of this great movement of expansion. Judaism and nothing else in the world preserves itself by subtraction, by a narrowing, by formation of new remnants always.[[257]](#footnote-264)

1. Hermann Cohen, “Du Sollst nicht einhergehen als ein Verläumder: Ein *Appell* an die Juden Amerikas,“ in: Hartwig Wiedebach (ed.), Kleinere Schriften V. 1913–1915, Werke 16, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997, 308-309. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Arthur A. Cohen (Ed.), *Essays from Martin Buber’s Journal Der Jude. 1916–1928*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1980, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cohen (Ed.), *Essays from Martin Buber’s Journal Der Jude. 1916–1928*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hermann Cohen, “Gottvertrauen“, in: Hartwig Wiedebach, Julius Schoeps, Christoph Schulte (eds.), *Kleinere Schriften VI. 1913–1915*, *Werke 17*, by, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot: Translated with an Introduction by Bezalel Naor,* Northvale NJ, London: 1993, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Cedric Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters,Edition, Translation and Introduction*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, 169. See also Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Michele Luzzati, “Ebrei schiavi e schiavi di ebrei nell’Italia centro-settentrionale in età medievale e moderna. Note di ricerca,” *Quaderni storici* 126.3 (2007): 699-718, esp. 703; Michele Luzzati, “Lo scudo della giustizia dei «gentili» nascite illegitime e prostituzione nel mondo ebraico Toscano del quattrocento,” *Quaderni storici* 115.1, (2004): 195-215, esp. 210. Angela Scandaliato demonstrates how the Jews of Sicily differed in this regard: they both owned and traded slaves (primarily Moors and black Africans). See Angela Scandaliato, *Judaica minora sicular, Indagini sugli ebrei di Sicilia nel Medioevo, e quattro studi in collaborazione con Maria Gerardi*, Florence: Giuntina, 365-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Sergio Tognetti, “The Trade in Black African Slaves in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” in T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (eds.), *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 213-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal 1441-1555,* London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Gomes Eannes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, trans. Charles Raymond Beazeley, New York: Routledge, 2016, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, *Documentos sobre a Expansão Quatrocentist portuguesa*, Lisbon: Edicoões Cosmos, 1956,vol. 1, 73. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Godinho, *Documentos sobre a expansão quatrocentista portuguesa,* vol. 1, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Tognetti, “The Trade in Black African Slaves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. João Teixeira, *Oraçam que teve Ioam Teyxeira Chancarel mòr destes Reynoos em tempo del Rey dom Ioam o segundo de Portugal,* Coimbra, 1562, 53 [no pagination in the edition]. My translation [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Zurara, *The Chronicle,* 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Levy Maria Jordão, *Bullarium patronatus portugallae regum*, Lisgon: Typografia national, 1868, 24; Visconde de Santarem, *Quadro elementar das relações politicas e diplomaticas de Portugal,* Lisbon: Academia real das sciencias, 1864, vol. 9, 55. On the subject see the illuminating book of Giuseppe Marcocci, *L’invenzione di une impero, Politica e cultura nel mondo portoghese (1450-1600)*, Rome: Carocci, 2011, 27-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Jordão, *Bullarium*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Teixeira, *Oraçam*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Umberto Cassuto, “Sulla Famiglia Da Pisa”, *Revista Israelitica* 5 p. 227-238, 6 (1909) 21-30, 102-113, 160-170, 223-236, 7 (1910) 8-16, 73-86, 146-150; David Kaufman, “La famille de Yehiel de Pise” *Revues des Etudes Juives* 26 (1893), 83-110, 220-239, 29 (1894), 142-147, 32 (1896), 130-134, 34 (1897), 309-311; Michele Luzzati. *La casa dell’ebreo,* Pisa 1985; Michele Luzzati, “Banchi e insediamenti nell’Italia centro settentrionale fra tardo Medioevo e inizi dell’Età moderna”, in *Gli ebrei in Italia* ed. Vivanti, C., vol. 1, p. 175-235; Michele Luzzati, “Caratteri dell’insediamento ebraico”, in *Gli ebrei di Pisa (secoli IX-XX)*, 1998, p. 1-41; Michele Luzzati, “La circolazione di uomini, donne e capitali ebraici nell'Italia del Quattrocento; un esempio toscano-cremonese”, in *Gli ebrei a Cremonia*, Firenze 2002, p. 33-52; Michele Luzzati, “Ruolo e funzione dei banchi ebraichi dell’Italia centro-settenttrionale nei secoli XV e XVI”, in *Banchi publici, banchi privati e monti di pietà nell’Europa preindustriale,* vol. II Genova 1991, p. 733-750. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. For the manuscript transmission of the letter, see Cedric Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, 1-10, 25-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For a notable exception, see Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Lopo de Almeida was a well-known figure. His letters written in 1453, describing both life in Italy and the wedding of Dona Eleonora to Frederic III, are generally considered a landmark in Portuguese literature. No less important was Abravanel’s friend, João Teixeira. See: Lopo de Almeida, *Cartas* de *Itália,* Centre de Estudos FilologicosLisboa 1935; João Teixeira, *Oraçam que teve Ioam Teyxeira,* Coimbra 1562; Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 41-48; Virginia Rau, *Portugal e o Mediterrâneo no século XV*, Lisboa 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Teixeira was a doctor in law, a Courtier and an early Portuguese humanist known for his *orationes* and for his relations with the Florentine humanist Angelo Poliziano – to whom he sent his three sons to study. Nuno Espinosa Gomes da Silva, *Humanesimo e Direito em Portugal no Século XVI*, Lisbon 1964, pp. 111-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 118-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See Martim de Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, Lisbon: Inapa, 1988, vol.1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, vol.3, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, vol.3, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, vol.3, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 118-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See Elias Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles in Castile: Dom David Negro and Dom Isaac Abravanel*, Jerusalem: Magness Press, 1997, 106. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, vol. 3, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Albuquerque (ed.), *Oracões de Obediência*, vol.3, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
38. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
39. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
40. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
41. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 127-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
42. Cohen Skalli (ed.), *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 142-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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57. Pina, *Cronicas*, 821. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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63. Pina, *Cronicas*, 825. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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70. Fonseca, *D. João II.*, 32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
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151. Ibid., 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
152. Ibid., 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
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154. Ibid., 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
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156. “The weight of gold that came to Solomon yearly was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold,besides *that* [which was brought by] the traveling merchants [*tharim*], from the income of traders, from all the kings of Arabia, and from the governors of the country… For the king had merchant ships which were at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the merchant ships came bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and monkeys.Thus, King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom.” [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
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164. For an overview of these different policies, see Diffie and Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580*, 57-165. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
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176. Ibid., 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
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178. Ibid., 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
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