Review of the manuscript of the book “The Land is Mine”

“The Land is Mine” seeks to refocus the attention of contemporary Jewish Studies scholars on an underappreciated corpus of material: Jewish discussions of ecological themes, especially by late 15th century Sephardi scholars like Isaac Abravanel, Isaac ben Moses Arama, and Abraham Saba. All three scholars are well-known figures, studied by numerous, respected scholars. However, the author is right to single out the until-now unnoticed fact that the three often share similar views on life in the city, land property, agriculture, shepherding, money, and technology. There is no doubt that a coherent study of these texts is a scholarly desideratum and that this book is a contribution, the first I think, to that goal. I read the book with great interest and rediscovered thereby many sources that I knew and became familiar for the first time with some that I did not.

In view of this significant contribution, namely refocusing our scholarly gaze on new ecological and social themes, I recommend publishing the book, but only after significative changes have been made. I will try to explain, as clearly as possible, the changes that I recommend. But, beforehand, I think it is worthwhile to articulate a fundamental dilemma: the author seems to vacillate between two options: on the one hand, a book that would elucidate the possible contribution of late medieval Jewish scholars to contemporary debates over land, property, technology, etc., and, on the other, a book that would reconstruct the historical, intellectual, and theological context of the “ecological criticism” of late medieval Sephardi scholars. Both two books could be fascinating, but the author has to choose between historical reconstitution, which perhaps has less direct implications on contemporary debates, and an essay on the possible contemporary contributions of these authors. In both cases, the author must address more directly the link between “ecological criticism” and theological concerns.

In what follows, I briefly review the different parts of the manuscript to explain how it could be improved.

**In the introduction:** The manuscript deals with important contemporary questions, but it fails to clearly define the field of the study. In my view, it overemphasizes the cultural criticism in the work of Abravanel, Arama, and Saba, while overlooking other aspects in their writings that are less amenable to this description. As mentioned, in my view, the author should either take a clearer historical and intellectual approach, or to focus on what we can learn today from the late medieval thought of Abravanel, Arama, and Saba. The introduction is filled with “exaggerations,” such as the one on page 7: “When Abravanel, Arama, and others searched ‘enthusiastically for religious and ethical content,’ they found it in abundance. These scholars were anti-materialists and anti-modernists. They believed that Judaism presented an alternative to the false gods of acquisitiveness, who, as they saw it, exerted powerful control over Jews in late Medieval Spain.” This is only partly true, as the scholarship quoted by the author has demonstrated. Here, too, a clarification of the field of investigation would easily solve the problem of these exaggerations. Moreover, here and throughout the book, the author has not relied on the most updated scholarship.

**In chapter 1:** The chapter should be refocused on a clearer textual confrontation of Abravanel’s, Arama’s, and Saba’s interpretation of the sin of Babel, its intellectual and theological context, and then move to more substantial demonstration of the influence of the Iberian urban context on their views. On page 35, the author writes: “This reality may have informed Abravanel’s view of the builders of the Bible’s first city, who moved away from what he termed ‘the ancient, natural way.’” This assertion is not proven anywhere in the chapter and should, in my view, be its focus. The chapter contains numerous inaccuracies concerning the life and work of Abravanel; these errors can easily be corrected by relying on recent scholarship. The translations of the Hebrew texts should be checked, they often contain errors.

**In chapter 2:** The chapter should be refocused on a clearer textual basis confronting the views of Abravanel, Arama, and Saba on rural life and especially the Garden of Eden. It should then move to the historical context of Iberian agricultural reforms, and the three Jewish scholars’ perceptions of them. Here again the intellectual and theological context could be easily enriched by focusing on the literature known by the three Jewish scholars, and on the literature produced in their immediate circles. Many translations of Hebrew texts are incorrect.

**In chapter 3:** “Sephardic Jews of Saba’s generation, including Isaac Abravanel and Isaac Arama, understood social justice, economic equality, and environmental responsibility as firmly intertwined.” This fascinating claim could be better substantiated by providing a clearer textual basis for the views of Abravanel, Arama, and Saba on the Jubilee. The author writes: “Abravanel, Saba, and Arama saw that the Bible presented a moral and ecological alternative to greed and rapacity.” In my view, the chapter could profit from taking more seriously the theological reasons that led Abravanel, Saba, and Arama to argue for limits on greed. The chapter presents many fascinating texts, but it would be vastly improved if the author could reflect a bit more about what the category of ecology entailed for fifteenth century authors like Abravanel, Arama, and Saba. The author writes: “As did Arama, Abravanel understood exile to be the appropriate— and historically justified— punishment for the Jews’ failure to heed these laws.” In fact, Abravanel and Arama have different views on the reasons for Jewish exile. I think that the argument of the chapter and the book is not served by this exaggeration.

**In chapter 4:** This beautiful chapter could also benefit, as mentioned in the case of earlier chapters, from a clearer philological foundation and a clearer exposition of the intellectual context. For me, the central problem in this excellent chapter is that seems to contradict the author’s argument for the “ecological” sensibility of the three Jewish scholars, since they idealize methods of shepherding that were destroying the Iberian soil.

**In chapter 5:** “For Arama, as for Abravanel and Saba, wealth was inimical to a system of ethics based on the Torah.”This statement seems to me exaggerated, but beyond that the problem lies in more clearly defining the intellectual and theological framework of their criticisms of greed. As recommended above, he author should provide this necessary context.

To conclude, I find this manuscript original thought-provoking. I am sure that, after restructuring the manuscript along some of the lines proposed here, it will be a successful book.