**“Le principe d’Abravanel”:** **Bible Criticism’s Forgotten Debt to Isaac Abravanel**

In his exegetical work, Abravanel followed in the footsteps of the Italian humanists, who had dealt mostly with the literature and history of the Romans… it is no accident that this Jewish author, [Abravanel], was the first to implement the methods of the humanists [to study] the book of Israel’s antiquities, the Bible; later, Christian theologians and political philosophers learned [their methods] from him. (Yiṣḥaq Baer, *Tarbiz* 8 [1937]: 248).[[1]](#footnote-1)

These words of celebrated historian of Sephardic Jewry, Yishaq Baer – written just sixty years after the first publication of Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena* (1878) – sought to remedy a historiographical injustice committed by the new biblical criticism. In the opening pages of the *Prolegomena,* Wellhausen declared “the Law […] the entire Pentateuch, is no literary unity and no simple historical quantity.” This is immediately followed by the remark: “since the days of Peyrerius and Spinoza, criticism has acknowledged the complex character of that remarkable literary production.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In his celebration of Spinoza’s contribution to a critical reading of Scripture, Wellhausen glossed over insights voiced more than a century earlier by another critical reader of Scripture – Don Isaac Abravanel.

Baer was not the only one to draw attention to this lacuna in the historiography of Bible criticism. Baer’s colleague at the nascent Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Bible professor, Moshe Hirsch Segal, similarly emphasized Abravanel’s contribution: “Although still rooted in Middle Ages,” he writes, “one can already discern in Abravanel the first signs of new conceptions and views, which eventually would lead to the scientific and critical hermeneutics, developed by later scholars who did not belong to Israel. […] These echoes [of new humanistic views] in Abravanel’s works found receptive ears among Christians humanists who studied avidly Abravanel’s biblical commentaries in Hebrew or in Latin translation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Likewise, Baer’s former colleague at the Berlin *Akademie des Wissenschaft des Judentums,* Leo Strauss, noted “Abravanel’s criticism of certain traditional opinions concerning the authorship of some biblical books […] paved the way for the much more thoroughgoing biblical criticism of Spinoza.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

While Strauss and Segal were more cautious than Baer, and more reluctant to celebrate Abravanel as the Jewish “father” of biblical criticism, they nevertheless drew attention to the puzzling erasure of Abravanel from the historical memory of Biblical criticism. The following chapter proposes to further this line of inquiry – by shedding light on this forgotten chapter of early modern biblical criticism, focusing on the odyssey of Abravanel’s seminal text – its first appearance in print in the 16th century, the historical and intellectual circumstances of its composition, and finally the text’s influence on the biblical criticism of the 17th century.

1. Yiṣḥaq Baer, “Don Yiṣḥaq Abarbanʾel ve-yeḥaso el beʿayot ha-historiyah ve-hamedinah,” *Tarbiz* 8 (1937): 248 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels,* Berlin, 1883, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moshe Hisrsh Segal, “Rabbi Yiṣḥaq Abarbanʾel betor parshan hamiqra,” *Tarbiz* 8 (1937): 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leo Strauss, “On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching,” J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (eds.), *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, Cambridge, 1937, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)