Dr. Cedric Cohen Skalli

Director, Bucerius Institute for Research of Contemporary German History and Society

Department of Jewish History

University of Haifa

Book Proposal

Through the Eyes of Isaac Abravanel: Essays on Empire, Freedom, and Biblical Criticism

Renowned politician, successful merchant, and prominent Jewish intellectual, Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) was active in Portugal and Castile in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Expelled with Iberian Jewry from Castile and Aragon, he found refuge in Italy, first in Naples, afterwards in Monopoli, and finally in Venice. While remembered as one of the last Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, he is also commonly viewed as one of the first Jewish thinkers of the early modern era – one of the first Jewish writers to integrate the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance into his exegetical and philosophical oeuvre. In the years following the expulsion, he styled himself a leader of the Sephardic exiles, and after his death in 1508, underwent an apotheosis becoming a legendary figure closely associated with this traumatic period in Jewish Sephardic memory and becoming an esteemed author whose works were diligently studied throughout the early modern period by Jews and Christians alike. His monumental corpus *–* written entirely in medieval Hebrew – encompasses biblical exegesis, philosophical discussions, and messianic speculation.

The aim of the proposed book, a collection of three essays, is to shed new light on Abravanel’s intellectual profile. Each essay is devoted to a central theme, characteristic of the period: the imperialistic expansionism of the Iberian kingdoms, the critical and historical study of sacred, ancient texts, and new notions of human freedom. Each essay examines Abravanel’s perspective on these novel aspects of the early modernity thereby integrating Abravanel’s views – clothed in the scholastic language of the Middle Ages – into the broader context of his contemporary intellectual environment. The three essays further demonstrate how the study of the Jewish perspective of Abravanel can contribute to a new intellectual history of the early modern period.

In what follows, I provide the proposed title of each essay with a brief synopsis of its contents. The manuscript of the second essay is complete (more than a third of the entire book) and is attached to the proposal as a sample.

**Chapter 1 - Don Isaac Abravanel and the Building of Iberian Empires: From the Portuguese Expansion to the Aftermath of the Expulsion in 1492**

This chapter seeks to illuminate Abravanel’s perspective on the empire-building policies pursued by the Iberian states of his day – particularly his early views regarding the expansionist, imperialistic policies of the Kingdom of Portugal in Morocco and the African coast during the 1460s and 1470s. The chapter concludes by discussing the evolution of Abravanel’s views on Christian expansionist policies in the aftermaths of Catholic Kings’ conquest of Granada and during the subsequent expulsion of the Jews in 1492, and the Italian Wars that erupted in 1494.

The first testimony of the presence of the Abravanel family in Portugal appears in the will of an important figure associated with Portuguese imperialist policy in Africa, King João I’s son Dom Fernando. In the will – dated to 1437, the year of Isaac Abravanel’s birth, his father features as the financier of the Infante Dom Fernando. That same year, Dom Fernando joined his brother, Don Henrique, the architect of Portuguese expansionist policy, at the Battle of Tangier; the Portuguese lost the battle, Dom Fernando was taken prisoner, and died in captivity a few years later.

In 1472, Isaac Abravanel sent an Hebrew letter to his friend, Jewish Italian Banker, Yehiel da Pisa, narrating his own role in liberating those Jews captured and sold into slavery with the fall of Moroccan Arzila to the Portuguese conquerors. Once again, Portugal’s expansionist policy and Abravanel’s life intersected. The capture of the Moroccan cities of Arzila and Tangier by the Portuguese in August-September 1471 can be seen, at least partly, as a displaced crusade against the “infidels.” Indeed, when Pope Calixtus III called for a crusade against the Ottoman Empire in 1455, to recapture a fallen Constantinople, King Afonso V of Portugal looked favorably upon the idea, seeing in this God-given mission an opportunity to consolidate his rule on the basis of military achievements and religious glory. His preparations for a crusade against the Turks frustrated, Afonso V redirected his religious zeal towards the Moors in Morocco. This decision aligned with King João I’s former policy to conquer and hold the city of Ceuta while, at the same time, promoting trade and missions of discovery along the Atlantic African coast.

King Afonso V’s victories in Alcacer Ceguer, Anafé, Arzila and Tangier between the years 1458 and 1471 contributed to his renown and earned him the title, *o Africano* (the African). The *Chronica de el Rei Affonso V* of Rui de Pina (1440-1521), a chronicle commissioned by King Manuel I in 1497, describes at length these military deeds and their political and religious underpinnings, relying on the former historiographic work of Gomes Eneas de Zurara and other royal records. The conquest of Arzila – which was followed a few days later by that of Tangier – was a celebrated event in Portugal and western Christendom as a whole. It eclipsed the Portuguese defeat in 1437 and was deemed a fitting revenge for the death of Infante Santo Dom Fernando. Following the great victory, the Infante’s bones were disinterred and repatriated to Portugal with ostentatious religious ceremonies and prayers. Large tapestries were commissioned to commemorate the victory, depicting the conquest and portraying King Afonso V as a victorious military commander.

Supplementing the royal perspective of these events is Isaac Abravanel’s Hebrew account of the Portuguese conquest of Arzila and the ensuing consequences for Arzilan Jewry – an invaluable historical record. Abravanel’s account affords us an opportunity to study his complex, and contemporaneous perspective of these important events – the perspective of a Jewish subject of the king of Portugal, who was also a leader of the Portuguese Jewry and an agent in the Jewish Diaspora. In this chapter, I will show how Abravanel’s vantage point was rooted in Jewish-Iberian multiculturalism, i.e., the Jewish assimilation of Christian power and its languages, as well as a more autonomous articulation of Jewish concerns in a Hebrew language informed by a long historical tradition (which entailed the significant influence of an Arabic heritage). This essay will contrast Abravanel’s perspective on imperial warfare, conquest, and slavery with the official perspective of the monarchy as expressed in the Chronicle of Rui de Pina and in the iconography of the Tapestries of Pastrana. Having shown Abravanel’s early perspectives on Portuguese expansionist and imperial policies, the chapter will proceed to explore the evolution of Abravanel’s views on Christian expansionist policies – this time, in response to the conquest of Granada at the hand of the Catholic Kings of Castile and the subsequent expulsion decree 1492. These views will be demonstrated by turning to Abravanel’s writings penned in exile, after the expulsion, as well as in his later, messianic works in which he envisioned an apocalyptic clash between the empires of Christendom and that of the Ottomans.

**Chapter Two - “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).

These words of celebrated historian of Iberian 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.” In his celebration of Spinoza’s contribution to a critical reading of Scripture, Wellhausen glossed over insights voiced almost two centuries earlier by another critical reader of Scripture – Don Isaac Abravanel. Baer was not the only one to draw attention to the Jewish lacuna in the historiography of Bible criticism. Baer’s former colleague at the Berlin *Akademie für die 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.” While Strauss was more cautious than Baer, and more reluctant to celebrate Abravanel as the Jewish “father” of biblical criticism, both scholars, each one in his own way, drew attention to the puzzling erasure of Abravanel from the historical memory of Biblical criticism, and to his replacement by the later figure of Spinoza. 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 16th century Italy, the historical and intellectual circumstances of its composition in late 15th century Iberia, and finally the text’s influence on the biblical criticism of the 17th century in northern Europe.

The chapter is divided in three sections:

***The historical background of the* Editio Princeps *of Abravanel’s Commentary on the Former Prophets***

This section explores the collaboration of an author, a printer, and editors in producing and shaping Abravanel’s first printed edition of *The Commentary on the Former Prophets*, published in 1511-1512. As explained by Judah Abravanel, this edition was a collaborative project, the handiwork of the *gaon* (great leader)*,* his talented firstborn and *talmid* (disciple, Judah himself), and an *aman* (craftsman), the greatest Jewish printer of the age, Gershon Soncino. Studying the editorial configuration of Abravanel’s innovative introductionin the *editio princeps* reveals an interesting tension between the clear emphasis on Abravanel’s authorial role in the new age of print and the complex question of the authorship of the biblical books in antiquity.

***From the court of the king to court of God: The road to historicizing the Bible***

Abravanel’s distinctive understanding of the meaning of authorship is reflected in a new understanding of the authorship and historical context of the books of the Former Prophets, developed at length in his introduction to *the Commentary on the Former Prophets* (first penned in 1483). It is this introduction – and its innovative vision of the Bible and the historical processes that produced it – that is explored in this section, all the while taking into account the Iberian intellectual context in which it was produced.

Abravanel’s introduction opens with an autobiographical narrative which dramatizes a dualistic tension between the service of the king and the service of God. This is followed by two scholastic inquiries into the nature of the books of the Former Prophets (replete with novelties about the composition of Scripture and the rhetorical goals behind it), in which Abravanel successfully superimposes a figure of the Iberian court, the chronicler and his historiographic service of the king, onto a godly court, populated by prophets, of the ancient Jewish kingdom, a court in which historiography also plays a major – even prophetic – role. Projecting the court position of the chronicler onto the circumstances of the ancient biblical prophets and judges is made possible by Abravanel’s own experience and identification with court life. This allowed him to infuse his description with his own familiarity with the court of the Portuguese monarchy – a knowledge rendered temporarily useless when he fled that country. A momentary crisis at the Portuguese court thus afforded Abravanel not only a pause for personal introspection, but also new insights into the historical and political circumstances that produced the books of the Former Prophets.

***The reception of Abravanel’s introduction in the new religious context of the 16th and 17th centuries***

In his introduction, Abravanel developed a new historical sensitivity toward the history and composition of texts, describing the production of the biblical books of the Former Prophets as a gradated process – first chroniclers committed events to writing; later, redactors edited and compiled these “primary” sources. This view opened new opportunities for later Jewish, Protestant and Catholic attempts at biblical criticism in the 16th and 17th century. This section focusses on the reception of Abravanel’s introduction both among Jewish scholars as well as among 17th century Christian Hebraists (especially Johannes Buxtorf the Son). It concludes with a comparison of Abravanel’s approach to that of Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologicus-politicus,* in which Spinoza celebrates Ibn Ezra’s critical insights, as well as to that of Richard Simon’s 1678 *Histoire critique de l’Ancien Testament,* which uses Abravanel’s text as an important source of inspiration, using it to justify his own historical and critical views on the history of the biblical text.

**Chapter Three - The Apologetic Necessity of Freedom**

In 1496, in the southern Italian city of Monopoli, Don Isaac completed his monumental commentary on the rabbinic tract, Ethics of the Fathers. He entitled it *Nahalat avot*. In his preface to the work, Abravanel explains that the commentary was written at the behest of his third son Samuel (1473-1551) who asked his father to commit his oral homilies to writing. In his choice to explicate this tannaitic tract, Don Isaac was perpetuating a traditional Spanish-Jewish genre that had been cultivated for centuries by great figures such as Maimonides, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, Rabbi Joseph Hayun (Don Isaac’s teacher) and many others. The renewal of this tradition in the aftermath of the Spanish expulsion was viewed by Abravanel as a way of demonstrating – and forging – cultural continuity.

According to Abravanel’s developmental-harmonistic understanding of the tractate’s structure, an idea that he endeavors to demonstrate throughout the commentary, the first chapter of Ethics of the Fathers is dedicated to the “pillars” – that is, the principles – of Judaism (the Torah, service of God, and good deeds); the second chapter discusses the ways by “which a person can act to achieve perfection”; the third chapter discusses “ways to distance oneself from sin”; the fourth chapter defines human perfection within the context of the Messiah, the Final Judgment, and the Resurrection of the Dead; and finally, the fifth chapter – which, is generally acknowledged as the true end of the tractate – discusses the methods by which a person will arrive “at the purpose of his creation and the perfection of the sublunar world which was created on his behalf.” In this chapter, I will explore one of the climaxes of *Nahalat avot* – Abravanel’s understanding of Rabbi Akiva’s famous three aphorisms, “beloved is man in that he was created in the image [of God]”; “beloved is Israel in that they were called children of the omnipresent”; and “everything is foreseen, but the free choice is granted.” This text represents Abravanel’s most successful attempt to develop an apologetic concept of freedom, which advocates the necessity of freedom for the sake of conserving Judaism, highlighting, in the traumatic aftermath of the 1492 expulsion, the voluntary nature of rabbinic Judaism and Diaspora life.

The chapter reconstructs the intellectual context of Abravanel’s seminal discussion, revealing its rich philosophical background (encompassing the traditions of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance) and its liberal use of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sources. The study focuses first on Abravanel’snew understanding of the Bible’s description of humanity being created in “The Image of God.” Opposing the Maimonidean view – which, according to Abravanel, denies any features common to God and man, and limits human dignity to intellect alone, at the expense of all other features – Abravanel presents an approach in which man, in all of his faculties and characteristics, reflects the divine.

The secondtheme of this discussion concerns Israel’s ambiguous cosmological circumstances. Abravanel contrasts the fates of nations – who are influenced by a specific astral body that determines and bears responsibility for its successes and failures – with Israel’s unique ability to most completely realize and actualize the humanity’s divine image by living their lives in accordance with the Torah and its commandments. Based on this notion, Abravanel goes on to develop a cosmology that concords with the competitive consciousness of the Sephardic exile, torn between a Christian environment, its history and the cosmological system that drives it, and a broken Jewish milieu, with its own unique but traumatic history, driven by its own hidden theological mechanisms.

The third focus of this discussion is the interesting tension between divine foreknowledgeand human freedom. On the one hand, the world is reflected within God Who has no timeline and Who views the world in panoramic, harmonious fashion. On the other hand, insofar as human existence is concerned, the order of the world – meaning the order and arrangement of the essential constituents of the universe – presents a dilemma, in which human freedom is entrusted with constantly prioritizing good over for evil. A human can adhere to the divine hierarchy or, conversely, adopt an invalid set of priorities. Thus, that which exists within God as a tranquil and comprehensive image of the world, becomes within the individual human the tempestuous drama of freedom. Every individual has the power to corrupt the divine image which inheres within the world and within humanity, or to confirm it and reproduce it and thus complete creation. This human drama serves Abravanel’s consistent apologetic agenda, one that is evident throughout his commentary. The Jew, having overcome the tribulations of the expulsion, resisted the temptation to convert to Christianity, and remained loyal to a proper Jewish lifestyle, realizes his or her freedom and accesses to his personal responsibility in the unfolding historical-religious process. Filled with this sense of his original freedom, the Sephardic exile is ready to accept the efforts necessary to reestablish Jewish exilic life in new Diaspora lands.