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**Book proposal**

**Through the eyes of Isaac Abravanel.**

**Three essays on Empire, Biblical criticism and Freedom.**

Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) was a renowned political, commercial, and intellectual Jewish figure in the second half of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. He lived and worked in Portugal and Castile. After the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Castile and Aragon, he found refuge in Naples, southern Italy and Venice. Abravanel is acknowledged as one of the last Jewish medieval philosophers, but also as one of the first early modern Jewish thinkers to integrate humanistic trends of the Renaissance into his exegetical and philosophical work. In the years following the 1492 expulsion, he was one of the leaders of Sephardic exiles, and after his death in 1508, he became a legendary figure associated with this traumatic period in Jewish Sephardic memory, and an author studied all along the early modern period by Jews and Christians alike. His monumental *corpus* consists mostly of biblical exegesis, philosophical tracts, and messianic works, all composed in medieval Hebrew.

This book wants to expose new aspects of Abravanel’s figure and work through three long essays. Each of the three essays deals with a central phenomenon or notion in the early modern period: the imperial expansion of Iberian Kingdoms, the critical and historical study of ancient and sacred texts, and a new notion of freedom. Each essay deploys the perspective of Abravanel on these respective novelties of the early modern period while embedding Abravanel’s views in the intellectual history of his times. The three essays demonstrate how the study of the Jewish perspective of Abravanel can contribute to a new intellectual history of the early modern period.

Here are the titles of the essays with brief explanation. The manuscript of the second essay is entirely ready (more than a third of the entire manuscript) and is joined to this proposal as a sample.

**1st Chapter - Don Isaac Abravanel and the building of Iberian Empires: from the Portuguese expansion to the aftermath of the 1492 Expulsion**

This chapter wants to illuminate Abravanel’s positioning vis-a-vis the building of Empires in his days. It focuses particularly on his early position regarding Portuguese expansionist and imperial policies in Morocco and the African coast in the years 1460s-1470s. Toward the end, the chapter sheds light on the evolution of Abravanel’s views on Christian expansionist policies in the aftermaths of Catholic Kings’ conquest of Granada and subsequent decree of Expulsion in 1492, and in the middle of the Italian Wars that sparked in 1494.

The first document attesting the presence of the Abravanel family in Portugal is found in the will of an important figure associated with Portuguese policy of conquest in Africa, King João I’s son Dom Fernando. In the will dated from 1437, the year of Isaac Abravanel’s birth, his father is featured 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, and fell tragically in captivity in the Portuguese defeat and died a few years later.

In 1472, Isaac Abravanel sent an Hebrew letter to his friend, the Jewish Italian Banker, Yehiel da Pisa, in which he narrates the role he assumed in the liberation of Jews captured and sold into slavery with the fall of Arzila in Morocco to Portuguese conquerors. Once again, Portugal’s expansionist policy and Abravanel’s life intersected. The capture of the Moroccan cities of Arzila and Tanger 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 Ottomans in 1455 after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, King Afonso V of Portugal responded positively, seeing in this mission the opportunity to consolidate his new Kingship on the basis of military achievements and religious glory. Confronted with the failure of the crusade preparations, Afonso V redirected his plan to fight the Turks towards the Moors of Morocco. This decision was also in line with King João I’s former dual policy to conquer and hold the city of Ceuta while furthering trade and discoveries along the Atlantic African coast.

King Afonso V’s victories in Alcacer Ceguer, Anafé, Arzila and Tanger between the years 1458 and 1471 added great renown to his reign and valued him the title, *o Africano* (the African). The *Chronica de el Rei Affonso V* of Rui de Pina (1440-1521), a chronicle ordered by King Manuel I in 1497, describes at length these military deeds and their political and religious underpinnings, relying on the former historiographic work Gomes Eneas de Zurara and on royal documentation. The conquest of Arzila – which was followed a few days later by that of Tangier – was a celebrated event in Portugal and western Christendom. It eclipsed the Portuguese defeat in 1437, and was deemed a fitting revenge for the death of Infante Santo Dom Fernando in captivity in Fez 1443. Following this great victory, Infante’s bones were unearthed and repatriated in Portugal with great religious ceremonies and prayers. Large tapestries were commissioned to commemorate this victory, depicting the conquest and King Afonso V as a victorious military commander.

In contrast to the official royal perspective on the events, exemplified in a wide ranges of sources (Chronicles, tapestries and royal documentation), Isaac Abravanel’s Hebrew account of the conquest of Arzila and of its harsh consequences for the Arzilan Jews is most valuable. It offers us an opportunity to study his complex view of the events – as a Portuguese Jew subject of the King, but also as a leader of the Portuguese Jewry and an agent in the Jewish Diaspora. This chapter will demonstrate and analyze the complex perspective of Abravanel, as rooted in Jewish Iberian multicultural position, understood as the assimilation of Christian power and its languages, and the autonomous articulation of Jewish concerns in a Hebrew language informed by a long historical tradition (which entails a significant Arab heritage). This essay will confront Abravanel’s perspective on imperial wars, conquests and slavery with the Royal perspective as expressed in the Chronicle of Rui de Pina and in the iconography of the Tapestries of Pastrana. Having defined this early position of Abravanel on Portuguese expansionist and imperial policies, the chapter will expose the evolution of Abravanel’s views on Christian expansionist policies after Catholic Kings’ conquest of Granada and subsequent decree of Expulsion in 1492, in the writings he wrote, as an exile, immediately after the Expulsion, and later in his messianic works in which his views evolved into an apocalyptic clash of the Ottoman and Christian imperialisms.

**2nd Chapter - “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 presents the interaction of author, printer and editors in the making and shaping Abravanel’s first printed edition of Commentary on the Former Prophets in 1511-1512. Following Yehuda Abravanel’s depiction, the edition of Abravanel’s commentary relied on the collaboration of a deceased *gaon* (great leader)*,* his talented firstborn and *talmid* (disciple, Yehuda), 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.

***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 history of the books of the Former Prophets, developed in his introduction to Commentary on the Former Prophets written 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, taking into account the broader Iberian intellectual context.

Abravanel’s introduction opens with an autobiographical narrative which dramatizes the tension between the service of the king and the service of God. By the end of the two scholastic inquiries into the nature of the books of the Former Prophets (replete with novelties about the rhetoric and composition of the biblical books), it appears that the historical approach developed by Abravanel has succeeded in transposing a figure of the court, the chronicler and his historiographic service of the king, onto a divine court populated by ancients prophets, in which historiography also plays a major – even prophetic – role. The transposition of the Courtesan position of the Chronicler into the situation of the ancient biblical prophets and Judges is made possible by Abravanel’s own experience and identification with court life. This allowed him to imagine a biblical court populated by prophets and judges; it 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 afforded Abravanel a moment of personal introspection, but also afforded him new insights into the historical and political background of the books of the Former Prophets.

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

Abravanel developed in his introduction a new historical sensitivity toward the texts’ history and composition, describing the making of the biblical books of the Former Prophets as a multilayered process entailing firstly the sources written by the historical redactors and later the work of compilation and edition made by the editors. This view opened new pathways for later Jewish, Protestant and Catholic biblical criticism in the 16th and 17th century. This section focusses on the reception of Abravanel’s introduction among Jewish scholars and among 17th century Christian Hebraists (especially Johannes Buxtorf the Son). It concludes with a juxtaposition of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologicus-politicus,* which celebrates Ibn Ezra’s critical insights, and Richard Simon’s 1678 *Histoire critique de l’Ancien Testament,* which makes of Abravanel’s introduction a central source of inspiration and justification for his own historical and critical views on the history of the biblical text.

**3rd Chapter - The apologetical 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, *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 to writing the homilies he had heard from him in the past. Furthermore, by choosing to comment on Ethics of the Fathers, Don Isaac was perpetuating a traditional Spanish-Jewish genre that had been cultivated for centuries by great figures like 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 cultural continuity.

According to Abravanel’s developmental-harmonistic understanding of the tractate’s structure, an idea that he endeavors to demonstrate throughout his commentary, the first chapter of Ethics of the Fathers is dedicated to “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, according to Abravanel and most others, is 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* – the commentary on Rabbi Akiva’s 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 right [of choice] is granted.” This text of Abravanel is one of the most achieved attempts of Abravanel to develop an apologetic concept of freedom, which advocates the necessity of freedom for the sake of conserving Judaism, revealing in the traumatic aftermath of the 1492 expulsion the voluntary nature of rabbinic Judaism and Diaspora.

This chapter reconstructs the intellectual context of Abravanel’s seminal discussion, revealing its rich antique, medieval and Renaissance philosophical background drawing on a wide rage of Jewish, Arabic-Muslim and Christian sources. The study focuses *first* on Abravanel’snew understanding of “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 *second* central theme concerns Israel’s ambiguous *cosmological situation*. Contrasting the influence of a specific astral body that determines fate of nations and bears responsibility for its successes and failures, with Israel’s unique ability to most completely realize and actualize the divine image which is part of man by living their lives in accordance with the Torah and its commandments, Abravanel develops a cosmology in tune with the extremely 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. Abravanel’s commentary on Rabbi Akiva’s three aphorisms focuses on a *third* theme, divine foreknowledgeand human freedom, which creates an interesting tension. On the one hand, the world is reflected within God with no timeline and in a 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 ordering for good or for evil. He 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 man the tempestuous drama of freedom. Man has the power to corrupt the divine image within himself and the world, or to confirm it and reproduce it and thus complete creation. This human drama serves the consistent apologetic agenda of Abravanel that is evident throughout his commentary. The Jew, having overcome the tribulations of the expulsion and the temptation to convert to Christianity, and by remaining loyal to a proper Jewish lifestyle, realizes his 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 exile in new Diaspora lands.