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

The book “The Land is mine” proposes to refocus the attention of contemporary Jewish scholars on an unnoticed corpus: Jewish discussions of ecological themes, especially by late 15th century Sephardi scholars like Abravanel, Arama and Saba. All these three scholars are well-known figures, studied by various and notorious scholars, yet the author is right to single out the unnoticed fact that they 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 was needed and that this book is a contribution, the first I think, to such a comprehensive study. Therefore, I read the book with much interest and rediscover through it many sources I knew, and some sources I didn’t know. In view of this significative contribution to refocus our scholarly gaze on new ecological and social themes, I recommend publishing the book, yet after significative changes have been made. I will try to explain, as clearly as possible, the changes. But let me express the dilemma: the author seems to hesitate between two options, a book which would elucidate the possible contribution of Jewish late medieval scholars to contemporary debates on land, property, technology etc.; and a book which would reconstruct the historical, intellectual and theological context of the “ecological criticism” of late medieval Sephardi scholars. The two books could be fascinating, but the author has to chose between historical reconstitution which has maybe less direct implications to contemporary debates, or an essay on the possible contemporary contribution of these authors. In both solutions, the author will have to address more directly the link between “ecological criticism” and theological concerns.

I will try to review briefly the different parts of the manuscript and explain what could be improved.

**In the introduction:** the manuscript is dealing with important question of our days, yet it fails to define clearly the field of the study. In my view, it overemphasizes the cultural criticism of Abravanel, Arama and Saba, while overlooking other aspects in their writings which fits less to this notion of cultural criticism. In my view, the author should either take a clearer historical and intellectual approach, or see what could be learned today from the late medieval thought of Abravanel, Arama and Saba. The introduction is filled with “exaggerations” like on p. 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 shown. Here again, a clarification of the field of investigation would easily solve the problem of these “exaggerations.” In this chapter and in other parts of the book, the scholarship used is not always updated.

**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 proof of the influence of the Iberian urban context on the view of the Abravanel, Arama and Saba. 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 is not proven anywhere in the chapter and this should be in my view its focus. The chapter contains many inaccuracies concerning the life and work of Abravanel, this can easily be corrected by using recent scholarship. The translations of the Hebrew texts should be checked, they often contain errors.

**In chapter 2: t**he chapter should be refocused on a clearer textual basis confronting the views of Abravanel, Arama and Saba on rural life and especially on the Gan Eden, and it should then move to the historical context in the Iberian agricultural changes, and its perception by the three Jewish scholars. Here again the intellectual and theological context could be easily improved by focusing on the literature known by the three Jewish scholars, and on the literature produced in their immediate entourage. 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 more substantiated by a clearer textual basis confronting 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 which brought Abravanel, Saba, and Arama to limit greed. The chapter presents many fascinating texts, yet it would be good if the author would reflect a bit more on the category of ecology for 15th century authors liker 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.” Abravanel and Arama have different views on the reason of 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 from the earlier remarks on clear philological basis and a clear clearer intellectual background. For me, the only problem is that this excellent chapter seems to contradict the “ecological” sensibility of the three Jewish Scholars, since they tend to idealize the kind of shepherding which was 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 view seems to me exaggerated, yet the problem is more to define more clearly the intellectual and theological framework of their criticism of greed. Using the remarks given earlier, these could be done by the author.

To conclude, I find this manuscript thought provoking and new. I am sure that after restructuring the manuscript along some of the lines proposed in this review, it will be a successful book.