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THE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS OF DON ISAAC ABRABANEL

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## I. Introduction

### 1. The Subject of my Dissertation

The subject of this dissertation is a study of Don Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel (also variously referred to as ‘Abarbanel’ or ‘Abravanel’ (1437-1508), insofar as his contribution to biblical exegesis is concerned. My study will also necessarily touch upon Abrabanel’s thought as Philosopher and Theologian, since (in common with many other biblical commentators) his philosophical and theological perspective heavily permeates his exegetical writings.

My study commences with an introductory biographical outline of the salient facts relating to Abrabanel’s lineage, the religious and cultural milieu in which he was reared, his early religious and secular education, his particular gifts and talents, the personal, intellectual and social contacts forged by him, his appointment to high state office in various countries, achievements as Jewish communal leader, and enforced migrations throughout southern Europe as a result of supervening political events. It will also contain information on the elements of education of Jews of the late medieval and Renaissance eras. All these matters need to be mentioned as backdrop to Abrabanel’s exegetical and theological compositions, since, as expected, and as will presently be demonstrated, they heavily influenced the direction of his thinking, and hence the contents of his exegesis.

However, this biographical chapter will be subordinated to the primary focus of my study, a detailed analysis of Abrabanel’s exegetical structure, methodology and

literary style, and of the substantive content of his commentaries. My study will extend over the full range of the biblical commentaries, so as to present a rounded and balanced picture. It will, wherever possible, include comparisons and contrasts with the exegesis of Abrabanel's predecessors and contemporaries, and a survey of the considerable impact made by him upon subsequent theological and exegetical scholarship. Finally, there will be a number of specialised thematic chapters devoted to selected topics of particular interest.

## 1.2 Review of Existing Literature

The ensuing discussion of previous relevant scholarship in the field will be both descriptive and analytical. Much secondary literature is available in relation to Abrabanel as biblical exegete. Whilst it is not feasible to refer to every author who has written on the subject, I shall refer to the views of those I regard as having made the most significant and useful contributions, and such views will, in turn, be subjected to detailed critical analysis to determine their validity in light of all available evidence from primary sources. For practical reasons, preference will be accorded to secondary literature composed in English or Hebrew (languages in which I am fluent), and in which most of the major literature is written; but it would be misleading to omit altogether references to scholarly contributions in German, French or Spanish where these clearly contribute to a profounder understanding of the subject. In such instances, I shall perforce rely, wherever possible, upon such English-language summaries of the main themes of the books, or articles, in question as are appended thereto, or on summaries contained in other secondary literature composed in English. I do, however, possess a working knowledge of French and Latin, which has enabled

me to read and/or translate unaided some important literary material in those languages.

### 1.2.1 Primary Sources

The primary sources for the study of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis are, naturally, the commentaries themselves, composed variously by him, in Hebrew, in Portugal, Spain, Naples and Venice between the mid-1460s and 1508, the year of his death. He wrote on the entire Pentateuch, the Former and Latter Prophets, and the Book of Daniel in the Hagiographa.

There are other commentaries and chronicles, too; namely, the exegetical works of Abrabanel's Jewish predecessors regularly cited by him. The most prominent of these are the commentaries of Rashi (N. France, 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> cent.), R. Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain/Italy 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> cent.), R. David Kimhi ('Radak') (S. France, 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> cent.), Nahmanides (Spain/Palestine-12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> cent.), R. Levi b. Gershon [Gersonides] (S. France, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent.), the '*D'rashot*' of R. Nissim Gerondi ('Ran') (Spain, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent.), and Maimonides' (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> cents.) Guide for the Perplexed. Besides these, Abrabanel occasionally refers to the commentaries of Saadia Gaon (Egypt/Babylonia, 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> cent.), the Gaon Samuel b. Hofni (Babylonia, 10<sup>th</sup>/11th cent.) and Joseph Ibn Kaspi (S. France/ Spain, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent.), and to the historical chronicles of the medieval historian Joseph ('Josippon') b. Gorion (S. Italy, 10th cent.), who produced an abridged, Hebrew version of the works of the ancient Jewish historian Josephus.

For non-Jewish writings, a convenient sub-division may be made between, on the one hand, citations from pagan, classical writers, such as Plato, Aristotle and Seneca,

some of whose views Abrabanel paraphrases in the philosophical sections of his commentaries, and on the other, citations or paraphrases of extracts from the works of previous Christian theologians and Church Fathers, notably Jerome (Palestine, 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> cent.), Augustine (N. Africa, 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> cent.), Aquinas (Cologne/Paris/Naples, 13<sup>th</sup> cent.), Nicholas de Lyra (France/Burgundy, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent.) and Paul of Burgos (formerly Solomon ha-Levi, a celebrated 14th century convert to Christianity).

Reference will be made in due course to a significant number of such primary sources in my discussion of Abrabanel's own stance on the validity of the views of the various authors cited in his exegesis.

### 1.2.2 Secondary Literature.

This again may conveniently be sub-divided into two distinct categories. The first comprises the works of Jewish and Christian biblical commentators writing during the period between Abrabanel's death and the early 20th century, mainly of a sacred character, who cite Abrabanel's commentaries either approvingly or disparagingly (as the case may be), within their own works. The names of many such exegetes will be provided in a subsequent 'Reception History' chapter. However, we may appropriately single out here some particularly eminent commentators throughout the ages who were manifestly influenced by Abrabanel. On the Jewish side, there are Solomon Ephraim Luntschitz (Poland, 16th/17th cent), author of the homiletical commentary 'Kli Yakar' on the Pentateuch, Menasseh ben Israel (Netherlands, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.), David Altschuler (Poland, 18<sup>th</sup> cent.), author of the classic 'Metzudot', commentaries on the Prophets and Hagiographa, an admirer, Meir Malbim (Eastern Europe/ Prussia, 19<sup>th</sup> cent.), another ardent admirer, with occasional reservations,

Samuel David Luzzatto (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), the renowned Italian scholar ('Shadal'), and David Z. Hoffmann (Germany, 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> cent.).

On the Christian side, it has been noted that as many as thirty biblical commentators have either translated parts of Abrabanel's works into Latin or cited him, either approvingly or otherwise. Amongst the most famous of these are Johannes Buxtorf the Younger (Switzerland, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.), the early international jurist and biblical scholar Hugo Grotius (Netherlands, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.), and the Jesuit Oratorian, Richard Simon (France, 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> cent.), regarded by some as the father of modern biblical criticism.

The second category of secondary literature comprises the modern academic (non-sacred) work of historians, philosophers, biographers, and exponents of '*Judische Wissenschaft*' on Abrabanel as a biblical exegete. The term 'modern' utilised here is intended to denote the period extending from the second third of the 19th century to date. In fact, virtually nothing of importance belonging to this genre was written about Abrabanel until the earlier half of that century, when several '*Haskalah*' scholars addressed themselves to the issue of alleged plagiarism in his writings – an issue originally raised by his near-contemporaries Meir Arama (son of Isaac Arama, author of '*Aqedat Yishaq*') and David Messer Leon in the early 16th century but long-since forgotten. An article on this theme appeared in a Judeo-German publication, '*Israelitische Annalen*', in 1839, by E. Carmoly.<sup>1</sup> This was followed the very next year by a similar type of article in the same journal by S. D. Luzzatto mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> [Interestingly, Messer Leon's disparaging remarks and bitter allegations

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<sup>1</sup> E. Carmoly: 'Annalecten 8, Plagiate' in: *Israelitische Annalen* 1 (1839) 101,181.

<sup>2</sup> S.D. Luzzatto: *Über die angeblichen Plagiate Abrabanel's und Muscato's* in: *Israelitische Annalen* 2 (1840) 17,25.

against Abrabanel, contained in his work ‘En ha-qoreh’ were excerpted, in the original Hebrew, in a Judeo-German academic publication entitled ‘Israelitische Letterbode’ in 1886-87.]<sup>3</sup> The identical theme of plagiarism was also tackled by S. Heller-Wilensky in her work ‘R. Yishaq Arama u-Mishnato’, published in Jerusalem, 1956,<sup>4</sup> and by H. Y. Pollak in his Introduction to Arama’s ‘Aqedat Yishaq’.<sup>5</sup>

After a lull of some forty years in academic literature on Abrabanel, in 1928 an article by one S. Grunberg, entitled ‘Eine Leuchte der Bibellexegese um die Wende des Mittelalters’ appeared in the Orthodox Jewish journal ‘Jeschurun’, published in Berlin.<sup>6</sup> This article is significant in two respects; first, it touches, albeit fleetingly, upon Abrabanel’s psychological insights into Scripture, a theme to be probed more deeply in my study, and secondly, it discusses the contrast between the ‘Andalusian’ (i.e. Spanish commentators’) exegetical approach and Abrabanel’s own vision of the biblical commentator’s task.

The monumental four-volume work ‘A History of Jewish literature’, by Meyer Waxman, was published in New York during the early 1930s, Vol.2 of which included several pages devoted to an exceptionally detailed and insightful analysis of Abrabanel’s biblical commentaries.<sup>7</sup> Several subsequent editions of this work have appeared, the most recent published in 2003.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Messer Leon: ‘En ha-qoreh’, pub. in: Israelitische Letterbode 12 (1886-87) 88.

<sup>4</sup> S. Heller-Wilensky: R. Yishaq Arama u-Mishnato (Jerusalem, 1956) 53-57.

<sup>5</sup> H.Y. Pollak: Introduction to Isaac Arama: Aqedat Yishaq 1 (1849; repr. Jerusalem, 1960) 5-7.

<sup>6</sup> S. Grunberg: ‘Eine Leuchte der Bibellexegese um die Wende des Mittelalters’ in: Jeschurun 15 (Berlin, 1928) 21-32, 213-25, 297-312 [rep. in idem, Zur Geschichte der Bibellexegese (Berlin, 1928) 37-86].

<sup>7</sup> M. Waxman: A History of Jewish Literature 2 (N.Y. 1933/4) 45-51.

Waxman notes correctly that Abrabanel spoke Portuguese, Spanish, Latin and Hebrew, and that he was conversant with the works of Christian scholastics. Besides his further controversial claim that he also knew Arabic, Waxman's additional propositions, as summarised below, are broadly in line with current conventional scholarship:

- Abrabanel undertakes to explain all possible major difficulties arising in Bible interpretation.
- He generally prefixes Introductions to his Commentaries, in which he discusses questions of authorship, date of composition and chronology, anticipating many problems posed by modern Bible critics. (However, Waxman omits the vital point that Abrabanel never discusses such issues in relation to the Pentateuch.)
- He is the first Jewish exegete to cite Christian sources extensively, occasionally accepting their validity. (Again, Waxman fails to mention Abrabanel's criteria for assessing the validity or otherwise of Christian interpretations.)
- He is generally anti-rationalist, though only moderately so.
- Whilst not especially mystically inclined, he has inevitably imbibed some of the spirit of his age.

Though not purporting to be an Abrabanel specialist, Waxman nonetheless seems to have anticipated the views of several later scholars.

The year 1937, the quincentenary of Abrabanel's birth, rekindled scholarly interest in him, triggering off a significant volume of literature to mark the occasion. A series of

six lectures on Abrabanel were delivered by various scholars, including Dr. L. Rabinowitz,<sup>8</sup> P. Goodman,<sup>9</sup> Dr. L. Strauss *et al.*,<sup>10</sup> these being published in Cambridge in a book edited by B. J. Trend and H. Loewe, the latter of whom (as Reader in Hebrew at the University) appended an introductory essay.

Rabinowitz cites the following impressive list of Jewish sources mentioned by Abrabanel, his evident intention being to illustrate the vast scope of Abrabanel's Jewish and secular knowledge.

Talmud, Midrash, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Gersonides, Nahmanides, Maimonides, Crescas, the Zohar and other *kabbalistic* works, Benjamin of Tudela and Karaite commentators.

He then lists an even more extensive array of classical and Christian sources:

Classical:

Pythagoras, Empedicles, Anaxagoras, Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, Ptolemy, Sallust, Virgil, Pliny, Plotinus, Porphyry, Galen, Hermes Trismegistas, Valerius Maximus, ancient Spanish historians, the 'books of the Latins' (*sic*).

Christian:

New Testament, Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Sextus Julius Africanus, Isidore of Seville, Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Nicholas de Lyra, the Travels of John de Mandeville.

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<sup>8</sup> L.Rabinowitz: 'Abravanel as Exegete' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures: ed. J.B. Trend & H. Loew (Cambridge, 1937) 77-92.

<sup>9</sup> P.Goodman: 'Don Isaac Abravanel: Introduction' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 2-16.

<sup>10</sup> L.Strauss: 'On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 95-129.

Rabinowitz further demonstrates Abrabanel's credentials as a *radical* biblical exegete, by noting several strongly-worded criticisms by him of several of his renowned predecessors, some ideological and others quasi-personal in nature. Abrabanel expresses disappointment with Rashi's exegetical methodology in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, accuses Ibn Ezra of being a scoffer in his commentary to Exodus 20:2, alleges plagiarism against Radak at the end of his commentary on Amos, levels two heavy criticisms at Maimonides, in his comments to 1 Kings 8:11 and II Samuel 24; and, in somewhat different vein, attacks the classical Jewish historian Josephus for being a Roman lackey, in *Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshu'ah* 10:7. He also, unfairly, accuses Radak of totally ignoring Midrashim.

Rabinowitz intriguingly observes:

'He (Abrabanel) takes every opportunity, even at the expense of sometimes far-fetched interpretations of the Midrashim, of showing how his exposition agrees with the interpretation of the passage in question by the ancient Rabbis'. (This observation will be analysed in my own ensuing study.)

Regarding Abrabanel's relationship to Christianity, again Rabinowitz is highly informative. He highlights Abrabanel's description of the papal hierarchy and the election of cardinals in his commentary to Isaiah 25:2, and his lengthy excursus on Christian history in his commentary to Isaiah 9:5, stressing that, although at times Abrabanel favours Christian over Jewish interpretations, this only applies in non-doctrinal matters (see his commentaries to 1 Kings V and 1 Samuel 3:4, for examples).

Rabinowitz concludes his lecture bemoaning the fact that Abrabanel's commentaries, (among Jews), are 'too much underrated and neglected', and affirming that 'he stands alone – in splendid isolation' – and that 'the rapid decline of rational exposition among Jews prevented him from having followers'. However, in contrast, he lists a number of 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century Christian scholars who commented on Abrabanel's exegetical works e.g. Lakemacher (Germany), Alting (Germany), L'Empereur (Netherlands), Hulsius (Netherlands), Carpzov (Germany), as well as mentioning one J.H. Mai, a German Biblical scholar, who translated Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah into Latin.<sup>11</sup>

Strauss opines that Abrabanel's anti-monarchical views, as clearly expressed in his commentaries to Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8, are attributable to Christian rather than to Jewish sources, in particular his departure from tradition on the issue of whether it was obligatory, under the Deuteronomic law, to appoint a king, or merely permissive. Strauss claims that Abrabanel's position resembles that of the Vulgate, (Jerome's official Latin translation of the Bible used by the Catholic Church), and of Nicholas de Lyra, in his 'Postilla' on Deut. 17:14: '*non est praeceptum, nec simplex concessio... sed est permissio quae est de malo*'. - 'It is not a command, nor a simple concession, but it is a permission which (stems) from evil'. My own study will develop this issue, to determine whether Strauss's view is correct.

Besides this, Strauss contends that, despite the humanist elements and tendencies recognisable in Abrabanel's writings, he is, notwithstanding, generally speaking, a Jewish medieval thinker. This places him fundamentally in agreement with B.Z. Netanyahu, Abrabanel's foremost biographer, on this crucial issue (see p.15 below).

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<sup>11</sup> J.H. Mai: *Dissertatio historico-philologica de origine, vita atque scriptis Don Isaaci Abrabanielis* (Altdorf, 1708).

Goodman, in his introductory lecture, besides claiming, incorrectly, that Abrabanel knew Arabic, and possibly Greek, adds little of interest other than his mention of a highly appreciative biography of Abrabanel composed in Latin by J. H. Mai (for whom, see above), in 1707.<sup>12</sup>

Gaster's lecture is informative on important matters. As to the form of Abrabanel's commentaries, he, in common with several other scholars, maintains that it imitates the model of his Christian contemporaries. As to their contents, they:

'reveal, in striking fashion, a characteristic permeating all his work ... the power of appreciating the inner and deeper significance of the sacred text without resort to mystical interpretation'.<sup>13</sup>

He further suggests that, upon the Jews' expulsion from Naples in the wake of the French and Spanish invasions, they must have taken Abrabanel's manuscripts with them and so helped to have them printed in Salonika or Constantinople.

Like Rabinowitz, Gaster notes that Abrabanel's commentaries were neglected in subsequent centuries by traditionalist Jewish circles ('who concentrated more on Talmudic legal intricacies than on general philosophies'). However, he conjectures that the first Spanish translation of the Bible made by a Jew, Samuel Usque, (Portugal/Italy, 16<sup>th</sup> cent.), may have been directly due to Abrabanel's influence.

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<sup>12</sup> Idem: 'Vita Don Isaaci Abrabanelis': Abravanel: Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah (Frankfurt- on- the- Main, 1711) 20-34.

<sup>13</sup> M. Gaster: 'Abravanel's Literary Work' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 41-73.

Besides a general biography of Abrabanel by J. Sarachek, in 1938,<sup>14</sup> and a book by S. Levy entitled ‘Isaac Abravanel as a Theologian’, published in the following year<sup>15</sup> (with neither of which this study of Abrabanel, as *exegete*, is directly concerned), a most intriguing doctoral thesis was published in London at around that time by Solomon Gaon, an Anglo-Jewish scholar, entitled ‘The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abravanel’.<sup>16</sup>

Gaon’s thesis was ground-breaking in that it sought to demonstrate, not only that Abrabanel was generally aware of the thought and works of contemporary, or near-contemporary, Christian theologians, but that his own exegetical methodology, and, far more significantly, many of his substantive ideas, appearing in his commentaries, were seriously influenced by Tostado, an eminent early 15th century Spanish Catholic theologian and biblical exegete. Gaon adduces numerous specific instances, culled from several of the legislative portions of the Pentateuch, of where the interpretation of a particular law or concept is unique to Abrabanel and Tostado, and contrary to mainstream Jewish tradition, as reflected in the Talmud or Midrash. He concludes that the sheer quantity of existing parallels is too great to be coincidental, and that, whilst Abrabanel did not always follow Tostado slavishly, he relied upon him heavily as a convenient encyclopaedic source of knowledge of Christian thought and biblical interpretation. Other scholars have, however, remained unconvinced by these arguments. One obvious problem with Gaon’s thesis is why Abrabanel never refers to Tostado by name, whilst unreservedly citing the names of other Christian exegetes.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Sarachek: *Don Isaac Abravanel* (N.Y.1938).

<sup>15</sup> S. Levy: *Isaac Abravanel as a Theologian* (London, 1939).

<sup>16</sup> S. Gaon: *Dissertation* (Univ. of London, 1939).

In 1953, Netanyahu published his classic biography of Abrabanel, Part 2 of which was devoted to ‘Abrabanel as Commentator and Philosopher’.<sup>17</sup> The work was contemporaneously hailed as a seminal piece of scholarship, and, though some of his views have been seriously challenged or modified by later scholars (e.g. Lawee), it still largely retains that reputation.

Netanyahu claimed that Abrabanel’s world-view and mindset were essentially medieval, anti-Renaissance. He supported this claim by observing that Abrabanel believed in astrology, demons and magic, interpreted biblical miracles literally, and held an anthropocentric view of the universe, as opposed to Maimonides and, except for astrology, also Gersonides. Abrabanel also strongly affirmed ‘*creatio ex nihilo*’, as against Gersonides. Netanyahu further classed Abrabanel as essentially a mystic.

This categorisation of Abrabanel as a ‘medievalist’ by Netanyahu is challenged by several other scholars. It is contended by Baer, Gaon, Lawee, and Cohen-Skalli, to name but a few, that he was essentially a ‘Renaissance man’ - indeed an early humanist. They point to his vast knowledge and appreciation of classical literature, his interest in areas beyond traditional rabbinic learning, e.g. history, geography, philosophy, etc., insisting that his commentaries breathe a spirit of modernity. Lawee also argues that Netanyahu failed to distinguish sufficiently between Abrabanel as philosopher, where he was admittedly conservative in outlook, and as biblical exegete, where he was occasionally quite radical. My own study will analyse both sides of the debate, and I hope to reach firm conclusions based upon all the available

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<sup>17</sup> B.Z. Netanyahu: Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher, (Philadelphia, 1953).

evidence from primary sources and other literature. I shall also endeavour to explain the reasons for any dichotomy as may be found to exist.

Despite the alleged flaws in Netanyahu's approach, his contribution to the relevant literature on the subject is still extremely valuable, particularly for the extensive and useful source-references to the commentaries and other works contained in the copious annotations to his text.

Besides the publication, in Israel, during the 1960s and 1970s, of comparatively more user-friendly versions of Abrabanel's biblical commentaries – albeit unaccompanied by annotated footnotes, index or bibliographies – and an interesting article published in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* in 1968 by S. Z. Leiman entitled 'Abarbanel and the Censor',<sup>18</sup> providing, for the first time, and discussing, those parts of his biblical commentaries existing in earlier but deleted from subsequent editions by Jewish or Christian censors as offensive to Christian sensibilities (and which will themselves receive due analysis in this study), nothing further of importance was published on Abrabanel until 1984. In that year, a Spanish scholar, G. Ruiz, in an article in *Simposio Biblico Espanol*, reverted to the theme originally tackled by Gaon almost fifty years earlier, and mentioned by Rabinowitz in his 1937 Cambridge lecture, of the Introductions appended to Abrabanel's commentaries and his 'question-and-answer' methodology.<sup>19</sup> Ruiz's thesis is basically that these introductions and questions – as a method – were the fruit of Abrabanel's familiarity with Christian authors, amongst whom (e.g. the much earlier Hugh of St. Victor) the idea of the composition of a

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<sup>18</sup> S.Z. Leiman: 'Abarbanel and the Censor' in: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (1968) 49-61.

<sup>19</sup> G. Ruiz: 'Las introducciones y cuestiones de don Isaac Abrabanel' in: *Simposio Biblico Espanol*, ed. N.Fernandez Marcos, J. Trebolle and J. Fernandez Vallina (Madrid, 1984) 707-722.

general introduction to the Bible, its various parts, and a discussion of its authors and style, were traditional. He cites Rabinowitz (though, surprisingly, not Gaon) for the view that Abrabanel's exegetical methodology was specifically influenced by Tostado, but himself dissents from this view as an unnecessary hypothesis.

In 1995, Lawee published an article in the journal 'Viator', entitled 'On the Threshold of the Renaissance: New Methods and Sensibilities in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel'.<sup>20</sup> In this he endeavoured to show how pivotal the Renaissance historical and methodological influences were on Abrabanel as an exegete.

He followed, the next year, with an article in the American Orthodox Jewish journal 'Tradition', entitled 'Don Isaac Abarbanel: who wrote the books of the Bible?', in which he pointed out that Abrabanel's expressed views on the authorship of several of the prophetic books deviated from those of the Babylonian Talmud in the direction of modern critical scholarship, and further, that his reasons for his departure from rabbinic tradition, though based on logic and historical perspective, were presented in such manner as to suggest that he was merely *developing the spirit* of that tradition further.<sup>21</sup>

Lawee composed another work on the same theme, 'Isaac Abarbanel's Stance towards Tradition', in 2002, which was far more comprehensive in scope, running to some 300 pages.<sup>22</sup> In this work, he discusses (*inter alia*) Abrabanel's approach to Midrash and emphasises the important role he assigned to it in achieving a profounder appreciation

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<sup>20</sup> E. Lawee: 'On the Threshold of the Renaissance: New Methods and Sensibilities in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel' in: Viator 26 (1995) 283-319.

<sup>21</sup> Idem: 'Don Isaac Abarbanel: who wrote the books of the Bible?' in: Tradition 30, 2 (1996) 65-73.

<sup>22</sup> Idem: Isaac Abarbanel's Stance towards Tradition (Albany, 2002).

of Scripture (so long as it is interpreted correctly), whilst simultaneously insisting that Abrabanel remains fundamentally an expositor of the ‘*P’shat*’. He devotes one chapter to Abrabanel’s deviations from traditional opinions as to the authorship of the various biblical books (the same theme as in his article in ‘Tradition’), and notes that, although Abrabanel evinces a critical spirit in regard to the prophetic writings, he avoids such an approach in the case of the Pentateuch, as a fundamental theological dogma is involved. Lawee further observes that occasionally Abrabanel defends the traditional viewpoint, e.g. on aspects of biblical chronology, against Josephus and the Christian historians. He does so, suggests Lawee, since he found the rabbinic tradition on such matters unanimous and firm, and moreover wished to refute Christian claims as to the prophetically predicted date for Christ’s birth. He emphasises that Abrabanel’s divergences from tradition are a far cry from those of the later Italian savant Azariah dei Rossi, who jettisoned rabbinic tradition almost entirely on chronological and historical issues.<sup>23</sup>

Lawee devotes another key chapter to an analysis of Abrabanel’s exegesis, and attempts to explain why Abrabanel is manifestly willing to accept some Midrashim at face value, whilst rejecting others. He suggests (*inter alia*) that one of Abrabanel’s major criteria for determining such matters is rationalism – he did not wish to endorse rabbinic statements which appeared absurd, as that might result in rabbinic tradition generally becoming scorned by the masses, and even by scholars.

Whilst one cannot do full justice here, in a comparatively brief literature review, to the numerous issues raised in Lawee’s comprehensive volume, suffice it to say that

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<sup>23</sup> A.dei Rossi: *Me’or Enayim*, ed. J. Weinberg (New Haven & London, 2001).

his analysis of the subject as a whole is rigorous, balanced and nuanced. The sole area he leaves totally untouched is one on which my own study will focus at length, namely Abrabanel's novel interpretations within the realm of '*P'shat*' (i.e. what he considers the 'plain/contextual meaning' of the biblical text).

In 2000, Lawee composed an article in the journal 'Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature', entitled 'Isaac Abarbanel's intellectual achievement and literary legacy in modern scholarship: a retrospective and opportunity'.<sup>24</sup> This contains an excellent synoptic and analytical review of all the major extant literature on Abrabanel to date, additionally highlighting several still untapped research areas available for future scholars. My own study will explore several of these recommended areas and provide fresh insights into them.

Although it is Lawee who has probably made the most significant recent contributions to Abrabanel exegetical studies, one cannot omit reference to important fresh material by other scholars. In 2003, Prof. M. Saperstein produced a monograph entitled 'The Method of Doubts – a problematising of Scripture in the late Middle Ages'.<sup>25</sup> This has shed further light on the origins of, or sources for, Abrabanel's clearly-defined method of prefacing each section of the Bible on which he was to comment with a list of questions raised by the passage. We thus have here a further reversion to the issues raised previously by Gaon, Rabinowitz and Ruiz.

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<sup>24</sup> Lawee: 'Isaac Abarbanel's Intellectual Achievement and Literary legacy in Modern Scholarship: A Retrospective and Opportunity' in: *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* 3 (2000) 213-247.

<sup>25</sup> M.Saperstein: 'The Method of Doubts – a problematising of Scripture in the late Middle Ages' in: *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Analysis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed.J.D.McAuliffe, B.D. Walfish & J.W.Goering (Oxford, 2003) 133-156.

In 2004, a fascinating article appeared in the journal ‘Accademia’ by B. Ogren, entitled ‘Circularity, the soul-vehicle and the Renaissance rebirth of reincarnation: Marsilio Ficino and Isaac Abrabanel on the possibility of transmigration’.<sup>26</sup> This article discusses how the concept of reincarnation, rejected by mainstream Christianity, yet succeeded in finding its way into Renaissance thought through the writings of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian Ficino amongst Christians, and of Abrabanel amongst Jews. The significance of this issue is twofold: in embracing reincarnation, to what extent was Abrabanel influenced by the Kabbalah, and by external ideologies, respectively? A related question is the precise role played by mysticism generally in Renaissance thought.

An additional important contribution to the relevant literature was made in 2003 by A. F. Borodowski, whose lengthy book entitled ‘Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy and Evil; The Tension between medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary’, tackles an issue already mentioned above i.e. the dichotomy between the views of the classical Jewish philosophers who preceded Abrabanel, and shaped subsequent Sephardic Jewish thought, on the one hand, and the exigencies of both the literal and the *midrashic* interpretation of the biblical text, on the other.<sup>27</sup> Borodowski demonstrates how Abrabanel endeavoured to resolve that basic dichotomy.

Yet another recent scholar venturing into the complex arena of Abrabanel studies is C. Cohen-Skalli, whose main focus is upon Abrabanel’s humanist credentials.<sup>28</sup> He

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<sup>26</sup> B. Ogren: ‘Circularity, the soul-vehicle and the Renaissance rebirth of reincarnation: Marsilio Ficino and Isaac Abrabanel on the possibility of Transmigration’ in: *Accademia* 6 (2004) 63-94.

<sup>27</sup> A.F. Borodowski: *Miracles, Creation, Prophecy and Evil: The Tensions between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary* (N.Y. 2003).

<sup>28</sup> C. Cohen-Skalli: ‘The Dual Humanism of Don Isaac Abravanel’: in: *Leituras* 14-15 (2004) 151-171.

published two interesting articles: the first, entitled ‘The Dual Humanism of Don Isaac Abravanel’, in ‘Leituras’, 2004, and the second, ‘Discovering Isaac Abravanel’s humanist rhetoric, in the Jewish Quarterly Review, 2007.<sup>29</sup> In the first, he demonstrates, by reference to two extant letters of consolation written by Abrabanel (one in Portuguese, addressed to a close Gentile friend and leading nobleman on the loss of his father-in-law, the other in Hebrew, addressed to his Jewish friend and Italian counterpart, Yehiel of Pisa, on his wife’s death and daughter’s conversion to Christianity), how Abrabanel employs the standard humanist rhetoric for the ‘Consolatio’, a conventional literary interweaving of appropriate biblical and classical sentiments. Cohen-Skalli’s views concur with the current mainstream academic consensus on Abrabanel, and conflict with those of Netanyahu (and, to some extent, of Strauss) who, as aforementioned, regard Abrabanel as essentially a medievalist.

Finally, on the technical side, one should not ignore the publication in Israel of two separate editions of Abrabanel’s Commentary on the Pentateuch, based on manuscript versions and the first printed editions, by A. Shotland in 1997,<sup>30</sup> and Y. Shaviv in 2007 respectively.<sup>31</sup> It is instructive to compare these early editions with the later, standard ones.

### 1.3 My New Perspective and the Issues to be Raised.

I now turn to the question of my own novel perspective and the specific fresh issues to be raised during the course of my study. Several of these have already been

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<sup>29</sup> Idem: ‘Discovering Isaac Abravanel’s Humanist Rhetoric’ in: JQR 97 (2007) 67-69.

<sup>30</sup> A. Shotland: *Perush ha-Torah/le... Yitzhak Abravanel al- pi defus rishon ve-khitve yad..; me’et Avishai Shotland* (Jerusalem, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Y. Shaviv: *Perush ha-Torah/le... Yitzhak Abravanel al- pi defus rishon ve-khitve yad..; me’et Yehudah Shaviv* (Jerusalem, 2007).

mentioned, but it will be convenient to list them together here. (The list is not necessarily intended to be exhaustive.)

Besides some issues explored in my biographical outline of Abrabanel's life and career, with which this dissertation is only indirectly concerned, my new perspective will contain (*inter alia*) my survey, discussions and conclusions on:

- The provenance and development of Abrabanel's 'Question-and-Answer' technique, and the way it differed from similar methodology employed by his exegetical contemporaries. (Chapter 2).
- The apparent dichotomy between Abrabanel's 'conservative' stance as philosopher/theologian, and his 'liberal' approach as biblical exegete; to illustrate this dichotomy and provide satisfactory explanations for it. This will include consideration of whether Abrabanel was fundamentally a medievalist, and perhaps also a mystic (as *per* Netanyahu) or a Renaissance humanist. (Chapter 2).
- Whether Abrabanel's frequent digressions in the course of his commentaries, providing historical, geographical, astronomical and anecdotal information, and offering political reflections and spiritual guidance, are justifiable within what is officially a commentary on the biblical text. (Chapter 2).
- The psychological elements within Abrabanel's biblical commentaries, of which several representative examples will be adduced and discussed. This should provide an appreciation of Abrabanel's insights into the inner motivations of individuals and groups of people appearing within the biblical narratives, and is an area expressly recommended by Lawee for further

research. It is particularly important for those regarding the Bible not merely as a record of past events, but as bearing a universally relevant message, since human nature is fundamentally identical in all ages, and those upon whom Abrabanel focuses psychologically may usefully be considered typological figures. (Chapter 2).

- The extent to which Abrabanel's political views influenced his biblical interpretations. Although this topic has been addressed before by various scholars (notably in Netanyahu's biography), I shall be treating it partially from a fresh perspective. Specifically, I shall elaborate on the extent to which, if at all, Abrabanel's trenchant anti-monarchism, contained in his exposition of Deuteronomy and I Samuel, were influenced by his own traumatic experiences with his Iberian sovereigns. While it is reasonable to assume that such experiences shaped his views, this is not necessarily so. My study will accordingly examine, in light of all the evidence, whether Abrabanel allowed his subjective experiences to direct his exegesis of those biblical passages concerning the appointment of a king, or whether he simply interpreted them in accordance with what he deemed their plain meaning. To ascertain which view is correct, I shall (*inter alia*) compare his ideas with those of other Jewish, and Christian, commentators. (Chapter 4).
- Abrabanel's stance towards Christianity and of the biblical interpretations of Christian scholars, which will be thoroughly analysed. I shall establish that his approach is marked by both hostility and sympathy, and explain the reasons for such dichotomy. No such comprehensive survey has to my knowledge yet been attempted. (Chapter 5).

- Abrabanel's attitude towards Karaite ideology, ritual practice and biblical exegesis. I will consider why Abrabanel found it necessary to refer to the Karaites altogether, as they had long been regarded as outside normative Judaism because of their repudiation of the Oral Law. A comparison will be made with the works of other rabbinic commentators to establish whether they too refer to the Karaites, and if so, to what extent, and whether favourably or otherwise. I will also ascertain whether Abrabanel's understanding of Karaite views was accurate, and illustrate the methods he used to combat them. Again, this theme apparently remains unexplored. (Chapter 6).
- Abrabanel's views on race and ethnicity, as revealed in his commentaries. I will critically analyse the views of those scholars who have tackled this issue in light of my own observations on Abrabanel's comments on all the relevant biblical texts, comparing these with those of other exegetes. (Chapter 7).
- A detailed investigation of the reasons for the relative neglect of Abrabanel's commentaries, particularly amongst Ashkenazi Jewry. This will not be purely theoretical, based on my own conjectures, but will incorporate the views of contemporary traditionalist Jewish scholars, rabbis and others, with whom I have discussed the issue. This will include an enumeration and analysis of various subsequent third party criticisms of specific 'untraditional' ideas propounded by Abrabanel, to ascertain the extent to which they were justified, from the perspective of Jewish tradition. I believe that this theme has not yet been comprehensively examined. *Per contra*, I shall explore the reasons for the perennial popularity of his exegesis amongst Christians. (Chapter 8).

#### 1.4 Manuscript and Text Editions

The edition of Abrabanel's biblical commentaries which has been utilised for this dissertation lists the following chronological sequence of printed editions of the Commentaries, constituting the basis for its text:<sup>32</sup>

Commentary to the Torah	Venice	1579
	Hanau	1709
	Amsterdam	1768
	Warsaw	1862
Commentary to the Former Prophets	Pesaro	1520
	Leipzig	1686
	Hamburg	1687

N.B. The Hamburg edition appeared together with the super-commentary of R. Jacob Fidanque, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Sephardi scholar and Rabbi in Hamburg.

Commentary to the Latter Prophets (Major)	Pesaro	1520
	Amsterdam	1641
Commentary to the Latter Prophets (Minor)		
and the Hagiographa (i.e. Daniel)	Pesaro	1520
	Amsterdam	1641.

However, in the article on Abrabanel in Encyclopedia Judaica 2, 103-109, various other editions are mentioned. Reference is made to the publication of his Commentary

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<sup>32</sup> See pp.27-28 for further detail.

to Jeremiah in 1504, to the Minor Prophets, Genesis and Exodus in 1505, and to Leviticus and Numbers, in 1579. Further mention is made of the 1551 Ferrara publication of Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah', i.e. his Commentary to Daniel, and to 'Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah', a commentary on the messianic prophecies contained in the prophetic books, in 1526.

Netanyahu's bibliography accords roughly with the dates given in the edition used by me, besides his reference to an edition of the Former Prophets printed in Pesaro in 1511/12. Whether this is an error for 1520, or another edition, is unclear. He also mentions the publication of Ma'ayenei Ha-Yeshu'ah in Ferrara in 1551, in accordance with the information in Encyclopedia Judaica.

Gaon's bibliography too virtually accords with the dates in the edition used by me, apart from his reference to a separate publication of Abrabanel's commentary to Kings in Leipzig in 1686, besides the one on the entire Former Prophets in the same year, which he also lists. He also mentions an edition of Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshu'ah published in Stettin in 1860.

Additionally, Abrabanel's Commentary to Deuteronomy ('Mirkevet ha -Mishneh') was published in an unexpurgated edition in Sabbionetta, Italy, in 1551. This edition included many anti-Christian passages and disparaging remarks about some of the royal personages with whom he had been directly or indirectly involved, which were deleted by Jewish and Christian professional censors from all subsequent editions. All the censored passages are printed in S.Z. Leiman's article, entitled 'Abarbanel and the

Censor', published in the Journal of Jewish Studies (1968), and will be referred to in the course of the current study, wherever appropriate.<sup>33</sup>.

As Abrabanel lived during the age of printing, it is scarcely necessary to consider different manuscript versions of his text, as several of his biblical commentaries were already published during his lifetime, and the remainder within just a few decades of his death. The printers of the early editions certainly complained of being provided with inordinately lengthy and poor-quality manuscripts from which to work (the length being due to Abrabanel's stylistic prolixity); yet remarkably few doubtful readings or textual variants remain in the modern version utilised by me. Those that do exist are clearly demarcated in the edition utilised by me by square or round brackets. The censored material found in the 1551 Sabbionetta edition is evidently authentic, as Leiman confirms.

The edition I have used for this dissertation is an eclectic one, in six volumes. The first three, on the Pentateuch, (the 'Arbel' edition), were published in Jerusalem in 1964. The frontispiece to each volume indicates that it is based on the various editions listed in the table above.

The volume containing Abrabanel's Commentary to the Former Prophets, published by 'Torah va-Da'at' (Jerusalem, 1955), is similarly stated to have been based on the relevant prior editions listed above.

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<sup>33</sup> See p.16 & fn.18.

The volumes containing the Commentary to the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and that to the remaining Latter Prophets and to Daniel, were published by Arbel (Jerusalem, 1979 and 1960 respectively), again in reliance upon relevant earlier editions.

In all cases the text is stated to have been reviewed and suitably emended by an unnamed local rabbinic authority, based upon ‘ancient sources’.

An intriguing subsidiary matter I considered in connection with Abrabanel’s biblical exegesis is whether he utilised manuscript or printed versions of the Bible and the Talmud. This question is impossible to resolve with certainty, as both alternatives are equally feasible. Both in Spain and Italy, there existed an abundance of standardised Jewish masoretic biblical manuscript texts, which, with only minute exceptions, were identical both with one another and with the text we have today. Total accuracy was virtually guaranteed due to the text’s sacrosanct nature, which induced the scribes to take extraordinary care in its transmission. In 1488, however, there appeared the first printed text of the Hebrew Bible, published by J.S. Soncino, in Italy, to which Abrabanel, composing the bulk of his commentaries in Venice in the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, would have had access. (Rashi’s pentateuchal commentary had actually been printed earlier, in Reggio di Calabria, in 1475.) There was also Naples, where Abrabanel resided for a while, which had become the greatest centre of Hebrew printing in Europe. Whilst logic dictates that Abrabanel would have utilised the Soncino version, or other printed versions, rather than manuscripts, this remains uncertain, as nowhere does he enlighten us on this point. Regarding the Talmud, although the entire Babylonian Talmud was not printed until the 1520s (ed.

Bomberg), Soncino had already printed versions of various individual tractates during the 1490s, which would thus have been available to Abrabanel. Again, it is likely, though not certain, that he would have utilised the printed tractates. Nowhere have I encountered citations either of biblical or Talmudic passages by Abrabanel differing in any way from the current received text.

### 1.5 My Own Methodology

1.5.1 I shall be focusing primarily upon Abrabanel as biblical exegete, surveying not only his pentateuchal commentaries, containing his most extensive exegesis; but also those on the Prophets, with requisite citations, thus presenting a rounded and balanced picture.

1.5.2 As aforementioned, I shall explore the apparent dichotomy between Abrabanel's conservatism as philosopher and his 'liberalist' tendencies as biblical commentator.

1.5.3 I shall further illustrate, by use of examples drawn directly from his commentaries on selected passages, those areas where he adheres to rabbinic tradition, and those where he deviates from it, endeavouring to explain the reasons for this apparently eclectic approach.

1.5.4 I shall also emphasise the significance of Abrabanel's dual role as both 'Digestor' of his predecessors' diverse views, and as creative thinker in his own right. I shall show how, even as 'Digestor', he breaks fresh ground in that, when recording his various predecessors' views, he generally does so critically, mutually comparing

them, noting their relative strengths and weaknesses, and explaining his reasons for rejecting their interpretations, wherever he does so. Such a phenomenon is unique amongst medieval Jewish commentators, and I shall accordingly highlight Abrabanel's singularity in this connection by excerpting, or paraphrasing, appropriate passages from his commentaries, and some of his exegetical predecessors, to demonstrate the vast difference in approach and methodology.

1.5.5 Regarding his role as creative thinker, I shall, again, be selecting a number of representative scriptural passages, comparing Abrabanel's '*P'shat*' with that of other commentators normally regarded as exponents of the 'plain meaning' of the text. I shall illustrate how radically different Abrabanel's interpretations are from theirs, and how he invests the text with a totally novel perspective. One extensive sample of this will be his exposition of the opening chapter of I Samuel, which breathes fresh life into the narrative in numerous different respects.

1.5.6 I shall examine (*inter alia*) how he was influenced by Political Thought, History, and general Renaissance humanist currents, with its emphasis on the ancient classics, and Christian theology.

1.5.7 I shall develop the existing research edifice of Lawee and the other modern Abrabanel scholars. My approach in this regard will be innovative insofar as:

- I shall be providing English translations of a significant number of selected excerpts from Abrabanel's Commentaries, exemplifying and illustrating the nuances of his thought and style, and indeed his radical innovations, in the

realm of ‘*P’shat*’. (Lawee has indeed conducted a similar exercise, but he has highlighted the *midrashic* elements incorporated in the Commentaries.)

- I shall survey in detail the impact of his ideas, as expressed in his Commentaries, both upon subsequent traditional Jewish commentators, and later Christian writers and exegetes. My survey will contain an analysis of selected citations from such writers.
- I shall also touch upon the question of Abrabanel’s rhetorical Hebrew prose style, and highlight his mastery of the ‘*melitzah*’ technique of interlarding his commentary with apposite biblical and rabbinic phrases. His much-criticised stylistic prolixity will also be briefly considered, and in this connection I shall present my own view, after assessing the arguments on either side, as to whether this was an intentional, or merely natural feature of his writing.
- I have purposely selected several specific themes for in-depth analysis, to each of which I have devoted a separate chapter. Besides the common threads running through all these ostensibly disparate topics (which I shall set out in detail in my overall conclusions at the end of the dissertation) I believe it important to explain at this point the reasons for my selection of each respective topic discussed in the thematic chapters listed in my Table of Contents.

Chapter 1 is a biographical outline of Abrabanel’s life and times, including his political career, which is essential for obtaining a full appreciation of his biblical exegesis in its historical context. The chapter also incorporates a description of the main features of the European Renaissance, focusing in particular upon its intellectual and educational aspects insofar as Jews were concerned.

Chapter 2 focuses upon Abrabanel's biblical exegesis itself, analysing in depth both its external features, such as its overall literary structure and linguistic style, and its substantive content. The chapter contains (*inter alia*) an elaborate discussion concerning the degree of Abrabanel's originality in respect of his chosen structural format, and additionally demonstrates and illustrates his unique contribution to the field of 'P'shat-type' exegesis and his significant broadening of this mode of scriptural interpretation.

Chapter 3, a detailed analysis of Abrabanel's commentary to I Samuel 1, simultaneously provides inter-connecting links with Chapters 4 and 5 and highlights various distinctive features of Abrabanel's mode of exegesis. For instance, Chapter 5 concerns Abrabanel's stance towards Christianity, and in the present chapter we encounter an example of Abrabanel explicitly citing and endorsing Christian exegesis on a particular aspect of the narrative.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the theme of the moral turpitude of the High Priest Eli's two sons, mentioned in Abrabanel's commentary to 1:3, is reminiscent of the corruption of the Christian clergy so prevalent in Abrabanel's day, and to which contemporary humanists took such strong exception.

Chapter 4 is devoted to an examination of Abrabanel's attitude towards the institution of Monarchy, and again, the biblical chapter currently under analysis from Abrabanel's perspective, describing the birth of the renowned prophet Samuel, provides the requisite backdrop to the foundation of the Israelite monarchy shortly to be created by Samuel through his selection and consecration of its first ruler, Saul, and later his successor, David. Significantly in this connection, Samuel's mother's

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<sup>34</sup> See Abrabanel: Commentary to Former Prophets: Commentary to Samuel, 171.

paean of praise to God on the occasion of his birth, in 2:1-10, concludes with the hope that the Lord ‘give strength unto His king and exalt the horn of His anointed’. It is, moreover, most interesting, as noted by Abrabanel himself in the Introduction to his Commentary to Samuel, that the Church Father Jerome, in his Latin Vulgate, named this book the (First) Book of Kings, as it deals with the reigns of the first two Israelite monarchs.<sup>35</sup>

Two reasons impelled me to revisit this theme of Monarchy, which has already been an object of study by other scholars, whose consensus is that Abrabanel was anti-monarchist. First, it provided an opportunity to portray Abrabanel as a fearlessly independent, nay revolutionary, Jewish biblical exegete, ready to deviate from, and indeed overturn mainstream tradition in the interests of truth, as he perceived it. As a corollary, I was anxious to discover and analyse the reaction of other traditional commentators to his controversial views on this issue, as a litmus-test of his radical credentials. Secondly, as in other instances, I wished to ascertain whether Abrabanel chose to base his maverick stance exclusively upon the relevant biblical texts, or whether he would also find it necessary to invoke minority rabbinic opinions, or extraneous factors, such as contemporary humanist thought, and/or his traumatic personal experiences, in support of his position. Such findings would greatly assist in ultimately determining the extent of Abrabanel’s radicalism.

Chapter 5 is, as aforementioned, devoted to Abrabanel’s stance towards Christianity, and here too, several factors combined to influence my decision to highlight this topic. Besides the fact that the subject in its entirety, both theological and politico-historical, has not yet been comprehensively explored by scholars, I felt it important to examine

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.162.

why Abrabanel chooses to expatiate upon so many aspects of Christianity in far greater depth – and, paradoxically, both in a more hostile and a more objective manner – than any of his exegetical predecessors or contemporaries. I was further intrigued by his anomalous personal position, as a traditional and learned Jew occupying the highest offices of state in two major staunchly Catholic realms, Portugal and Spain – both bywords for religious intolerance - and accordingly wished to discover precisely how he related to such a situation, insofar as expressed in his exegetical works.

Chapter 6 concerns Abrabanel’s relationship to Karaite theology and ritual observance, and their mode of biblical interpretation. My overriding consideration in selecting this particular theme for detailed analysis was that it has not yet been dealt with comprehensively from an academic perspective. Additionally, I considered it important to compare the stance adopted by Abrabanel respectively towards Christianity – an external threat to Judaism – and towards Karaism, a heresy threatening the faith from within.

Chapter 7 discusses Abrabanel’s views on Race and Ethnicity, and, once more, several contributory factors impelled me to focus in depth upon this theme. First, my biographical researches into Abrabanel revealed that he and his wife owned a young black slave-girl from Guinea. This was in itself most intriguing, as slave-ownership was hardly a life-style normally associated with traditional Jewish scholars and communal leaders. Moreover, some contemporary academics who have written on black slavery in the early modern period, e.g. David Brion Davis,<sup>36</sup> have been quick to

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<sup>36</sup>See p.349 fn.881.

accuse Abrabanel, as a prominent Portuguese nobleman, of slave-trading and being a major trend-setter in this field for later generations of his co-religionists, who owned black slaves in the American colonies. In light of such considerations, I deemed it vital to ascertain whether such controversial claims had any historical foundation. Appreciating, however, that the subject of black slavery needed to be studied within the more general context of early modern European theories of race and ethnicity, I determined to research this topic, laying particular emphasis on the recorded views of contemporaneous Jewish thinkers, and specifically Abrabanel, on this theme. Did he simply share the prejudices of the surrounding society, or was his approach more enlightened? Accordingly, the main focus of my research became Abrabanel's discursive exegesis of all the various biblical passages touching upon race, ethnicity and slavery, and a comparison of his ideas with those of other traditional Jewish commentators.

1.5.8 My choice of citations from Abrabanel's commentaries was determined largely by my desire to highlight such themes, arguments and/or linguistic nuances as I deemed typical of Abrabanel and that could be regarded as distinctive features of his exegesis. These include (*inter alia*) his subtle dialectics, originality, independence of thought, thoroughness and attention to detail. I consider that, taken together, these various excerpts can be regarded as representative. I have excerpted the respective Hebrew texts of the lengthier and/or more significant passages cited by me, and placed these in an Appendix at the end of my dissertation, immediately following the Bibliography, numbered (1) to (28) consecutively, and duly cross-referenced in the body of the dissertation.

## Chapter One

### Biographical Outline of Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1508)

#### 1. General Introduction

Don Isaac Abrabanel probably ranks as one of the most illustrious, outstanding and fascinating personalities in post-Talmudic Jewish history. One would indeed be hard-pressed to find any other individual who achieved such overall prominence in both the political and the religious/communal spheres. International statesman, courtier, financier, commercial agent, philosopher, his energy and versatility enabled him to pack a greater number of varied activities into his 71 year life-span than any other Jewish communal leader, with the possible exception of Maimonides. His era, too, was extraordinary, marked by some of the most rapid and revolutionary changes both to general European society and Diaspora Jewry since Roman times. For it coincided with the European Renaissance, when men's intellectual, cultural and geographical horizons were broadened beyond compare. However, it also coincided with the decline, and eventual extinction, of a proud and vibrant Sephardi cultural and religious tradition that had prevailed for over a millennium on the Iberian Peninsula. Abrabanel's own role in these epoch-making events, which permanently altered the course of Jewish history, is major and dramatic, as are likewise his exceptional vicissitudes of fortune throughout his distinguished, albeit helter-skelter, political career.

Although this dissertation is entitled 'The Biblical Exegesis of Don Isaac Abrabanel', I nonetheless consider it necessary to commence with this biographical chapter. This is primarily to enable me to illustrate the various ways in which Abrabanel's personal

experiences as national and international statesman over several decades influenced the content of his biblical commentaries. Every writer is inevitably influenced in some measure by his social, political and cultural milieu, and this is certainly true of Abrabanel, who was not only a major player on the European political scene, but also a product of the remarkable Renaissance era, when established ideologies and intellectual certainties were being universally challenged, and frequently overturned. Abrabanel's biblical exegesis must be viewed within the context of his times and his own experiences, to obtain an adequate historical perspective.

Whilst most contemporary educated Jews are aware of Abrabanel as a significant figure in Jewish history, they know little of his life, political career, communal leadership, achievements, or innovative approach to Jewish learning and biblical exegesis. Colourful legends abound in relation to his activities which frequently fail to accord with sober historical fact. It is accordingly the task of anyone attempting to write about Abrabanel to sift the wheat from the chaff, to establish strict historical truth, so far as possible, from contemporary sources after the lapse of over five centuries. The value of his unique and enduring contribution to authentic Jewish thought must also be critically assessed.

Some useful material on Abrabanel's life and career has been gleaned from his first, albeit very brief, biography, composed in 1550/1551 and published in Ferrara in 1551 by a prominent Italian Rabbi, Baruch Uzziel Hesqeto/ Hazketto (Forti), appended by him to Abrabanel's messianic treatise *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah* (forming part of his Commentary to Daniel) which he was editing.<sup>37</sup> In this biography, Hesqeto expressly

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<sup>37</sup> Abrabanel: *Commentary to Hagiographa* (Jerusalem, 1960) 268-270.

acknowledges his indebtedness to Abrabanel's two younger sons, Joseph and Samuel, then still resident in Ferrara, for furnishing him with so much authentic material from their own recollections. Hesqeto also relies heavily upon Abrabanel's detailed historical reminiscences included within his own Commentaries.

Several other full-length biographies have subsequently appeared, but in the 20th century, perhaps the two most comprehensive ones are those of Joseph Saracheck, a Jewish literature specialist, in 1938, and the far more comprehensive one of B. Z. Netanyahu, former political analyst and writer, in 1953, which has gone through several revised editions.<sup>38</sup> Another, quasi-biographical work, entitled 'Abarbanel and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain', by J.S. Minkin, though informative in numerous respects, suffers the disadvantage of a total lack of footnotes citing primary sources, and must accordingly be treated with caution.<sup>39</sup> All the recent biographers have been able to draw upon numerous contemporary or near-contemporary sources (besides Abrabanel's own writings) - the Portuguese, Spanish, Neapolitan and Venetian state archives, and the recorded reminiscences of prominent Jewish exiles from Spain, e.g. Joseph Jabez, preacher, homilist and exegete,<sup>40</sup> Elijah Kapsali, historian and leader of the Cretan Jewish community,<sup>41</sup> and Meir Arama, biblical exegete / philosopher,<sup>42</sup> son of Isaac Arama, author of the classic work 'Aqedat Yizhak'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher (Philadelphia, 1953); Saracheck: Don Isaac Abravanel (N.Y.1938).

<sup>39</sup> J.S. Minkin: Abarbanel and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain (N.Y.1938).

<sup>40</sup> J. Jabez: Ma'amar ha-Ahdut (Ferrara, 1554) *et al.*

<sup>41</sup> E. Kapsali: D'Bei Eliyahu, ed. M. Lattes (Padua, 1569).

<sup>42</sup> M.Arama: Sefer Urim ve-Tumim (Venice, 1603) *et al.*

<sup>43</sup> I.Arama: Akedat Yizhak (Venice, 1573) *et al.*

Furthermore, there are the Jewish historian, rabbinic scholar, mathematician/astronomer Abraham Zacuto, whose major works are listed in the relevant footnote below,<sup>44</sup> Solomon Ibn Verga, whose historiographical masterpiece, *Shevet Yehudah*, is an invaluable source for the events surrounding the Expulsion and Abrabanel's dramatic role therein,<sup>45</sup> Joseph ha-Kohen, general and Jewish historian, physician and philologist, whose work *Emek ha-Bakha* ('Vale of Weeping'), contains a detailed martyrological account of medieval European Jewry, the Jewish historian and moralist Samuel Usque, and others.<sup>46</sup>

[It is worth mentioning, in passing, at this juncture, that Ibn Verga's historical approach to the causes of the Expulsion differs somewhat from Abrabanel's. Robert Bonfil, in discussing this topic, observes that Ibn Verga is far more critical of Spanish Jewry than Abrabanel (and indeed his near-contemporaries Samuel Usque and Joseph Ha-Kohen too), charging them with unnecessary ostentation, a propensity to internal controversy and creating an image in the Gentile mind of being exploiters of the poor. He also, unlike Abrabanel, Usque and Ha-Kohen, presents the Iberian rulers and the Popes in a generally favourable light, as dealing justly with the Jews, protecting them from libels and the gratuitous hatred of the populace. Bonfil further notes that Usque and Ha-Kohen both tried hard, albeit unsuccessfully, to demonstrate Nemesis in Jewish history, i.e. how the Gentile rulers were punished for the way they had dealt with the Jews. For Ibn Verga, however, such correlation was rather less obvious.]<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A. Zacuto: *Bi'ur Luhot*, pub. J. Vecinho as *Almanach Perpetuum* (Leiria, 1496) (Latin); *Sefer Yuhasin* (Constantinople, 1566, with editorial omissions and additions) *et al.*

<sup>45</sup> S. Ibn Verga: *Shevet Yehudah* (ed. A. Shohat (Jerusalem, 1947).

<sup>46</sup> J. ha-Kohen: *Emek ha-Bakha*: Heb. text with critical edition and comments by K. Almbladh (Uppsala, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> R. Bonfil: 'The Legacy of Sephardi Jewry in Historical Writing' in: H. Beinart [Ed.] *The Sephardi Legacy 2* (Jerusalem, 1992) 217-238.

Also available are Abrabanel's extant correspondence with various third parties,<sup>48</sup> references to him in the literary works of his eldest and most famous son, the physician, philosopher and poet Judah (Leone Ebreo), and in the writings of various Gentile historians, e.g. Ribeiro dos Santos (an 18th century Portuguese jurist, philologist and humanist, whose works included studies on the history and literature of Portuguese Jewry),<sup>49</sup> the Spanish historian and royal administrator Geronimo de Zurita y Castro,<sup>50</sup> and the Italian historian and diarist Marino Sanuto/Sanudo, resident in Venice contemporaneously with Abrabanel.<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding this wealth of authentic primary sources, several significant gaps still remain in our knowledge of Abrabanel. This is inevitable, due to the huge time-gap separating him from us, and to the fact that the actions and motivations of high-ranking diplomatic personages are often shrouded in obscurity.

This chapter, though not covering chronologically all the events in Abrabanel's life, focuses upon those deemed most significant for the development of his political and spiritual thought and biblical exegesis, and those that have generated the greatest academic controversies.

## 2. Family Background and Education

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<sup>48</sup> C. Cohen-Skalli: Isaac Abravanel: Letters: Edition, Translation and Introduction (Berlin & N.Y. 2007).

<sup>49</sup> A.Ribeiro dos Santos: An Account of the Sacred Literature of the Portuguese Jews from the Early Days of the Monarchy until the end of the 15th century; On the Civil and Religious Rights of the Jews in Portugal and their Emigration to various countries in the World; Memorias de Academia (Lisbon, 1812).

<sup>50</sup> G. de Zurita y Castro: Anales de la corona de Aragon (Saragossa, 1670).

<sup>51</sup> M. Sanudo (Sanuto): I Diarii (1496-1533) 58 vols.(Venice, 1879-1902) .

Isaac Abrabanel (known variously as ‘Abravanel’, ‘Abravaniel’, and, less accurately, ‘Abarbanel’), was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1437. His father, Judah, Finance Minister to the Sovereign, Alfonso (Afonso) V, enjoyed close relations with members of the royal court and was also lay-leader of the Portuguese Jewish community during the 1460s. The name of Abrabanel’s mother, or even of her family, has not come down to us – not entirely surprisingly, considering the generally subordinate position of women at the time.

Abrabanel’s family boasted an ancient and eminent lineage, traceable back, so they claimed, to the biblical King David, and he himself proudly proclaimed it.<sup>52</sup> Whether such lineage was authentic cannot now be determined, but notably, Abrabanel himself enumerates only six generations of his ancestors.<sup>53</sup> His claim was challenged even by some of his near-contemporaries, let alone later historians.<sup>54</sup> However, the family name Abrabanel/Abravanel itself is a traditional Sephardi one, representing a diminutive form of the name ‘Abravan’ (a Spanish form of ‘Abraham’).<sup>55</sup> The family initially appears in Spanish historical records around 1300, its first prominent member being Judah Abrabanel, Treasurer and tax-collector under Sancho IV and Ferdinand IV in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. His descendants subsequently attained distinction in Spain during the 15th century.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Former Prophets: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua (Jerusalem, 1955) 2; Commentary to Latter Prophets (Minor): Commentary to Zechariah (Tel Aviv, 1960) 239; Judah Abrabanel’s introductory poem to Abrabanel’s Commentary to Latter Prophets (Major) (Jerusalem, 1979) 2.

<sup>53</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. David b. Judah Messer Leon (16<sup>th</sup> cent.): ‘En ha-qoreh’, pub. G. Polak in: Ha-Maggid 2 (1858) 25; J. Bartolocci: Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica 3 (Rome, 1683) 886. See also Saracheck: Abravanel, 19.

<sup>55</sup> A.J. Reines: ‘Abrabanel, Isaac b. Judah’ in: Encyclopedia Judaica 2 ed. C. Roth & G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1972) 102.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Samuel of Seville, Abrabanel's grandfather, had great influence at the Castilian court, serving as royal treasurer in Andalusia in 1388. During the traumatic anti-Jewish riots and persecution of 1391, he was forcibly converted to Christianity, and then appointed comptroller in Castile. He and his family later fled to Portugal, where they reverted to Judaism and filled important governmental posts.<sup>57</sup>

His son Judah, Isaac's father, served as financial agent to Infante Ferdinand of Portugal and, later, the Duke of Braganza. His extensive export business involved trading relations even with places as distant as Flanders. Subsequently, he rose to become Treasurer to Alfonso V. We know from various sources (Portuguese historians and Abrabanel himself) that Alfonso was generally a benign ruler, favourable towards the Jews, several of whom held high government positions.<sup>58</sup> Besides being lay-leader of Portuguese Jewry, Judah must also have been a competent Judaic scholar, though not actually a rabbi. He was extremely wealthy – we have a record of a debt of 506,000 *reis* owed to him by the previous Portuguese ruler, Duarte, which he requested to be repaid to him in his will.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Abrabanel, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua and elsewhere, describes his father as ‘a man of valour, mighty in deeds, whose name was renowned in Israel’.<sup>60</sup> He testifies, in the Introduction to his Commentary on the Passover Haggadah, that he himself was ‘brought up from childhood in wealth and honour’.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Amador de los Rios: Historia Social, Politica y Religiosa de los Judíos de España y Portugal 2 (Madrid, 1876) 295; S. Dubnov: History of the Jews (New Jersey & London, 1969) 314.

<sup>58</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 10, citing Antonio Caetano de Sousa: Provos de Historia Genealagica da Casa Real Portugueza 1 (Lisbon, 1739) 507; Minkin: Abarbanel, 41-42.

<sup>60</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.10.

Isaac was the most talented of Judah's four sons, and his father accordingly ensured that he received the best Jewish and secular education then available. To enable us fully to appreciate its nature and content, in context, we must initially describe the essential features of the religious and secular education a Western European Jewish youth of the Renaissance era would customarily obtain, and this, likewise, will be preceded by a brief outline of the typical features of that remarkable period.

## 2.1 The European Renaissance

The Renaissance is conventionally regarded as extending from c.1430-c.1600. It was marked by an almost spontaneous efflorescence of art and culture, interest in and literary appreciation of the Graeco-Roman classics, development of a sense of historical perspective, significant advances in medicine, geography and astronomy, enormous expansion in international trade, and a general open-mindedness towards novel ideas. The countries primarily affected by it were the Italian States, France, Spain, Portugal, England, Flanders and the numerous German-speaking territories under the dominion of the Holy Roman Empire. Although the Italian states were at the forefront of innovation and development in art, music, literature and medicine, it is erroneous to assume, with some historians, that the Iberian Peninsula, because of its deep-rooted Catholic piety and conservatism, was slow to embrace the cultural ideas prevalent elsewhere. In the literary field, one need only think of the great writer Cervantes, Shakespeare's Spanish counterpart, and in that of global exploration, the names of Columbus and Vasco da Gama (Portuguese discoverer of a new sea-route to India) spring instantly to mind.<sup>62</sup> The general humanistic atmosphere had even begun to pervade the ecclesiastically-orientated Spanish universities.

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<sup>62</sup> The name Cervantes interestingly appears on lists of typical Marrano names. In his preface to *Don*

In the religious realm, medieval scholasticism (a combination of Aristotelian philosophy, allegorisation, and sophisticated casuistry), was gradually giving way to a more modernistic way of interpreting Scripture, in which grammar, and linguistic and historical analysis of sacred texts, were increasingly being taken into account. Emphasis was laid upon study of the biblical texts in their original languages, Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New, replacing the medieval fixation on the Vulgate. The scholastic tradition did not, however, vanish overnight, and its diehard exponents clung tenaciously to the old ways, strenuously resisting any humanistic trends or intellectual innovations. Furthermore, there was no absolute dichotomy between Renaissance humanism and traditional religion; many leading humanists, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, probably the Renaissance's foremost intellectual, and the eminent jurist, Hebraist and classicist Reuchlin (who championed rabbinic literature against the apostate Jew Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans), despite their abandonment of scholasticism, remained staunchly Catholic, pursuing neither the path of secularism nor that of the Protestant reformers.

The education offered included an intensive study of the Graeco-Roman classics (which naturally involved learning Latin and Greek), music and dancing, an outline of European history, the vernacular language, the principles of grammar and rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, logic, astrology (then universally regarded as a science), theology and geography.<sup>63</sup> There were schools offering tuition in these subjects,

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Quixote, Cervantes praises Abrabanel's son Judah's work 'Dialoghi d'Amore, referring to its author, in the English translated version, as 'Leon the Jew'. See Cervantes: Don Quixote: trans. P.A. Motteux (Ware, 1993) 6.

<sup>63</sup> M.A. Shulvass: The Jews in the World of the Renaissance (Chicago, 1973) 172; E.R. Miller: Jewish Multiglossia: Hebrew, Arabic and Castilian in Medieval Spain: Jewish Education in Medieval Spain

though many employed private tutors attending the pupils' homes. For higher education, there were the established universities, some of which, like the Sorbonne in Paris, Salamanca in Spain, and Padua in Italy, were highly prestigious and sought after, and which, certainly by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, had incorporated humanist studies within their curriculum.<sup>64</sup>

## 2.2 Education of Jews in Medieval and Renaissance Europe.

We must now examine precisely how Jews fitted in to this pattern. Secular subjects were chiefly studied with private, Christian tutors; and indeed, outstanding humanists even resided as tutors in wealthy homes.<sup>65</sup> However, Jewish pupils from affluent backgrounds also occasionally attended private Christian schools, Pope Martin V, who was relatively well-disposed towards the Jews, having permitted this in 1429.<sup>66</sup> We happen to know that in Siena, Jewish children went to a Christian teacher's home to study '*grammatica*' (Italian grammar) - and that he even taught grammar in the local Talmudic academy.<sup>67</sup> Notably in this connection, a certain individual was once recommended for the position of 'Rosh Yeshivah' (Dean of the Academy) because of his fluency in both Hebrew and Italian (or Latin)!<sup>68</sup>

The standard curriculum for Jewish students must now be examined. One source indicates that secular studies during this period included Italian, Latin, singing and

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(Detroit, 1982). See also W.H. Woodward: Studies in Education during the Age of the Renaissance, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1965, as a source for general Renaissance education.

<sup>64</sup> Art. 'Universities' in: The Renaissance: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, ed. I. Rachum (London & Jerusalem, 1979) 549-550, citing C. H. Haskins: The Rise of Universities (1923).

<sup>65</sup> Shulvass: The Jews in the World of the Renaissance, 169.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid; A.Marx: Studies in Jewish History and Booklore (N.Y.1944) Louis Ginzberg Memorial Volume, 278, 285 (Hebrew Section).

<sup>68</sup> Shulvass: Jews in World of Renaissance, 170; Marx: Studies, 294.

dancing, deportment, and sometimes also philosophy.<sup>69</sup> Primary emphasis was, however, upon sacred lore. Abrabanel's contemporary R. David Ibn Yahya, grammarian, biblical exegete and *halakhist*, described grammar, poetry, logic and the works of the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazali (cited by Abrabanel in his commentary to 1 Kings 3:12, and elsewhere, by his forename Abu Hamad), as mere 'dessert'.<sup>70</sup> The core of instruction was Talmud, studied daily.<sup>71</sup> Another important source for the content of Jewish education in Italy is the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century physician R. Abraham Portaleone, author of 'Shiltei ha-Gibborim', who addresses this subject in his Introduction.<sup>72</sup> He states that as soon as youngsters could study the Bible with commentaries, they started learning Maimonides' Code, proceeding progressively to Mishnah, Gemara and Tosafot.<sup>73</sup>

For Spain and Portugal, we possess substantial information about the educational position for both medieval and Renaissance periods. Jewish youth studied Hebrew poetry and grammar, and acknowledged moralistic masterpieces.<sup>74</sup> One of our main primary source for Iberia in the High Middle Ages is Judah ibn Tibbon, a 12th century scholar, who stressed the value of secular studies, knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew writing, religion and science (especially medicine), and ethical conduct.<sup>75</sup> The following Jewish educational pattern was already well-established in medieval times: the child started by learning the Hebrew letters and syllables, and then proceeded to general biblical study, followed by the study of each weekly portion in turn. He was

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<sup>69</sup> Shulvass: Jews in World, 171.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> A. Portaleone: *Shiltei ha-Gibborim* (Mantua, 1612).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Introduction.

<sup>74</sup> Minkin: Abarbanel, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Miller: Jewish Multiglossia, 59; I. Abrahams: Hebrew Ethical Wills (JPS, Philadelphia, 1926) 51-92.

subsequently taught to translate the Pentateuch into the vernacular. During his third or fourth year of study, this extended to translation of the Prophets and Hagiographa, and sections of the liturgy.<sup>76</sup>

By age ten, the pupil was deemed ready for the study of Mishnah, and by thirteen, for the Babylonian Talmud. Most boys studied only until thirteen to fifteen, and only the more talented received advanced education. These then spent a further seven years in Talmudic learning.<sup>77</sup>

A further primary source for Sephardic Jewish education is Judah b. Samuel ibn Abbas (mid-13th century), in whose curriculum religious subjects came first, followed by science. Within the sciences, the student was to begin with medicine, progressing in turn to arithmetic and music, logic (especially Aristotelian), natural science and metaphysics.<sup>78</sup>

Plainly, the average well-educated Spanish Jew possessed a wide range of knowledge. Extensive linguistic expertise, especially in Arabic, was expected for all aspiring to culture.<sup>79</sup>

There were Jewish primary schools, usually private and paid for by the parents' fees, though Yeshivahs were often supported by the local communities. Additionally, Spanish Jews frequently provided financial support for their recognised scholars, and

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<sup>76</sup> Miller, 50-51.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.56.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 62.

granted them tax exemptions.<sup>80</sup> Significantly in this respect, Spanish Jewry ignored Maimonides' codified prohibition on communal support for Torah scholars, preferring the more realistic approach of an earlier Spanish rabbinic authority, Samuel ha-Nagid.<sup>81</sup>

Elementary classes were traditionally limited to twenty-five students. However, large lecture classes were common at the more advanced educational levels.<sup>82</sup>

In 1432, the Jewish communal leaders assembled at Valladolid, where they enacted 'Takkanot' (binding communal decrees) governing Jewish education throughout Castile.<sup>83</sup> These entirely overhauled the existing educational system, probably remaining operative until the Expulsion in 1492.<sup>84</sup> There is no clear evidence suggesting that they were not fully implemented in practice, notwithstanding Bloomberg's dissenting view.<sup>85</sup> Their provisions may be neatly summarised thus:

'Each community of fifteen or more families must have a teacher for Bible, whilst communities of forty families or more must do everything possible to ensure that they had teachers for Talmud, Halakhah (practical Jewish law) and Aggadah (ethical and allegorical teachings, and folklore). The teachers were to be paid by the parents; if

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Internet Medieval Source Book: Synod of Castilian Jews 1432 (Fordham University, N.Y.1999) citing L.Finkelstein: Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages (N.Y.1924) 349-375. The internet source cites the entire text of the *Takkanot* verbatim. See also Y. Baer: A History of the Jews in Christian Spain, II. (JPS, Philadelphia, 1966) 261-262.

<sup>84</sup> Baer, 270, is ambiguous on the issue of the duration of the *Takkanot*. On the one hand, he maintains that there is no record of their enforcement, whilst on the other, he states that 'they stood Castilian Jewry in good stead until the year of the Expulsion, and there were leaders and scholars who watched over them'.

<sup>85</sup> J. Bloomberg: The Jewish World in the Middle Ages (Hoboken, 2000) 159; cf. Baer, 261-262.

any parents could not afford the fees, the requisite funds were to be provided by communal taxes.' (Thus, at least from the time of this enactment, poverty was no bar to obtaining a high-standard Jewish education.)

'An elementary teacher was forbidden to have over twenty-five children in his class without an assistant. One assistant sufficed for classes of between twenty-five and forty, but two were required for classes over forty. Finally, every trained scholar was entitled to establish a Yeshivah.'<sup>86</sup>

Students were generally attracted to particular Yeshivahs on account of the intellectual reputation of the city where they were located. At these institutions, only religious subjects were studied formally, higher secular education having to be acquired by one's own efforts.<sup>87</sup> Scholars studying informally mastered the Torah subjects first, and then the sciences, including logic, medicine and metaphysics.<sup>88</sup>

An early 15th century Spanish authority, Profiat Duran, recommended studying with a friend, using mnemonics to aid the memory, reading aloud and learning by teaching others.<sup>89</sup>

According to Miller at any rate, it seems fair to conclude that Jewish educational standards were superior to Christian ones throughout the Middle Ages (though not necessarily during the Renaissance era) and that they reached their peak in Spain, where secular studies were emphasised more than in any other European country with

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.54.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

a sizeable Jewish population.<sup>90</sup> Kanarfogel, an authority on medieval Jewish history and literature, is the sole dissenter from this view, maintaining that Ashkenazi Jewish education during the same period, with its primary focus on Talmudic studies, was superior. He states:-

'The educational level of both laymen and upper-level students in Spain was generally lower than in Ashkenaz. Adults in Spain who showed some desire to study could very often not master even rudimentary Talmudic studies... In the later period reactions and reflections concerning the penetration and diffusion of Mishneh Torah into Spain... presume or confirm that the laity among Spanish Jewry were not very knowledgeable in Talmudic studies'.<sup>91</sup>

However, whilst admittedly in Central and Eastern Europe, there was a more intensive study of the Talmud and the *halakhic* Codes, biblical study (particularly the Prophets and Hagiographa) Hebrew grammar and Jewish philosophy, equally vital elements in Jewish education, were neglected, and, indeed, even discouraged by many of the leading religious authorities.<sup>92</sup>

Whilst during the earlier medieval period, when most of Spain was still under Muslim rule, there was a marked tendency to encourage secular studies alongside Torah, as

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<sup>90</sup> See p.48.

<sup>91</sup> E. Kanarfogel: Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages (Detroit, 1992) 64.

<sup>92</sup> Tosafot to Babylonian Talmud : Kiddushin 30a, citing R. Tam's statement that it was customary in his time (at least in Northern France) to focus upon Talmud alone, as it incorporated Bible and Mishnah. Note also, for the Renaissance era, R. Solomon Luria's letter to R. Moses Isserles ('Rema') castigating him for his predilection for philosophy, and similar diatribe against Maimonides - and another sideswipe against the early biblical exegete Ibn Ezra, for his alleged lack of Talmudic expertise. [Yam shel Sh'lomo: Introduction to Commentary to Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Bava Kamma (Jerusalem, 1995) 12].

time progressed and the Christians regained control of much of the country, the Jewish religious authorities grew increasingly suspicious of secular studies, fearing their potential for undermining traditional Jewish observance. This was due partly to the generally narrower approach typical of late medieval Christianity, and partly to the decline in piety and ritual observance by the Jewish intelligentsia as a result of their exposure to Greek philosophy, for which the adverse influence of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed was held largely responsible. Accordingly, R. Solomon ibn Adret ('Rashba') leading Spanish rabbi and author of numerous learned Responsa, reacting to anti-Maimonidean pressures, issued a formal ban in 1305, binding upon all Spanish Jewry, on philosophical study by anyone under twenty-five. Study of the sciences was similarly prohibited, except for medicine.<sup>93</sup> The ban, however, failed to achieve its desired purpose – frequently ignored, it drove even a deeper wedge between the traditional and liberal sections of Spanish Jewry. By the mid-15th century, the lure of humanist education had become virtually irresistible amongst the intellectual elite, who eagerly embraced philology, rhetoric, calligraphy, astronomy, geometry and poetry. Detailed linguistic knowledge, particularly of Hebrew and Arabic, became standard within these circles, and generally it was felt that the ultimate aim of Jewish education was to create productive members of society.<sup>94</sup>

Apparently, the situation in Portugal was broadly similar to that in Spain, except that Portuguese Jewry were not subject to the 'Takkanot' of Valladolid, applicable to Spain only, and that they were prohibited by a recent papal edict from attending Christian schools, thus compelling them to resort to private education. Insofar as

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<sup>93</sup> J. Sarachek: *Faith and Reason* (N.Y.1935; rep.1970) 231-232; Ibn Adret: *Responsa* (Vienna,1812) 52.

<sup>94</sup> Miller: *Jewish Multiglossia*, 62-63.

universities were concerned, the General Church Council of Basle (1431-43), convoked by Pope Martin V, had forbidden Jewish admission, this proscription applying throughout Christian Europe.<sup>95</sup>

During the final decades before the Expulsion, humanist culture became so pervasive and assimilationist trends so powerful that even the traditionalist, anti-philosophical party felt constrained to acknowledge at least the externals of Renaissance humanism, and argue the case for traditional Judaism in a rationalistic manner, employing humanist rhetoric for their own purposes. One of the most outstanding of these ‘conservative rationalists’ on the Iberian Peninsula was Abrabanel, whose personal education during his formative years we may now fully describe and analyse in context.

### 2.3 Abrabanel’s Personal Education

Since Isaac displayed early signs of extraordinary intellectual precocity, Judah ensured that he received the best Jewish and secular education then available. Besides his native Portuguese, he learned Castilian, the dialect of Northern Spain (also frequently employed by the Portuguese nobility), Latin (then the universal language of scholarly discourse throughout Europe),<sup>96</sup> and, naturally, Hebrew. Some claim that he also learned Arabic.<sup>97</sup> This is doubtful, as Abrabanel expressly writes that he could not understand the language spoken by the Jewish citizens of Arzilla, Morocco, captured by the Portuguese on their conquest of the town and sold as slaves to the

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<sup>95</sup> M.L.Margolis & A. Marx: *A History of the Jewish People* (JPS, Philadelphia, 1947) 414.

<sup>96</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Waxman: *History of Jewish Literature* 2 (N.Y.1933/4) 254; Goodman: ‘Don Isaac Abravanel: Introduction’ in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 5.

nobility - which was Arabic.<sup>98</sup> Saracheck further maintains that he also knew Italian; though this is plausible, he adduces no evidence in support, nor is any independent proof available.<sup>99</sup> It is likely, however, that he subsequently became acquainted with Italian, during his lengthy residence in Naples, Monopoli and Venice after 1492. We know from contemporary or near-contemporary literary sources, in any event, that his linguistic skills were exceptional. Kapsali, testifying to what he had heard from Spanish exiles, when recounting Abrabanel's initial appearance before Ferdinand and Isabella, declared:

'There was none like him in the land, a man fluent in the languages of every nation, having access to royal courts and palaces, with knowledge of idiomatic expressions within their languages and with ability to discern verbal nuances'.<sup>100</sup>

These talents plainly equipped him admirably for his future diplomatic career. Additionally, they played a significant role in his subsequent biblical exegesis, as will presently be seen.

Isaac additionally studied Greek philosophy (through Hebrew and Latin translations of the works of Plato, Aristotle and others), ancient Roman and more modern European history. He read classic Roman authors and poets, e.g. Cicero, Seneca and Virgil, in the original Latin, and further became acquainted with Christian scholastic philosophy and theology.<sup>101</sup> Probably he was also familiar with the humanist rhetoric in vogue at the time, especially as he was exposed to humanist methods and

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<sup>98</sup> Abrabanel: 'Letter to Yehiel of Pisa' in: Ozar Nehmad 2 (1856) 67.

<sup>99</sup> Saracheck: Abravanel, 23.

<sup>100</sup> Kapsali: D'Bei Eliyahu, 71.

<sup>101</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 13.

intellectual concerns at Alfonso's court.<sup>102</sup> The degree of his absorption of such rhetoric, as a literary genre, is evident from his four Letters of Consolation written whilst still in Portugal.<sup>103</sup> The first, composed in Portuguese and sent to his intimate friend, the Count of Faro, on his father-in-law's death, abounds with classical and biblical references. The remaining three, in Hebrew, were addressed to his renowned Italian counterpart, the wealthy magnate and Jewish communal leader Yehiel of Pisa, commiserating with him on his wife's death and daughter's conversion to Christianity and sympathising with Yehiel's personal and communal problems. These letters too are couched in typical humanist philosophical mode and rhetoric.<sup>104</sup> Abrabanel, however, never attended school or university (the latter having been barred to Jews by papal edict), and thus had to receive all his education privately.

Nowhere, throughout his copious writings, does Abrabanel specifically mention what he learned in his formative years. This is deducible, however, from his abundant citations from the aforementioned sources, and many others, interspersed throughout his literary works.

At this point, we must examine Netanyahu's controversial claim that, far from being a humanist, he was essentially a medieval thinker, having a world-view centred on God rather than on man,<sup>105</sup> with mystic tendencies.<sup>106</sup> It should, however, already be clear, from the broad scope of the secular literature regularly cited by Abrabanel, that this claim is untenable. Admittedly, he remained religious throughout his life and

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<sup>102</sup> Lawee: 'Abravanel, Isaac' in: Encyclopedia of the Renaissance 1, ed. P.F. Grendler (N.Y. 1999)1-2.

<sup>103</sup> Cohen-Skalli: Isaac Abravanel: Letters.

<sup>104</sup> Idem: 'The Dual Humanism of Don Isaac Abrabanel' in: Leituras: Revista da Biblioteca (2006)14-15; 151-171.

<sup>105</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 148. Netanyahu emphasises Abrabanel's intense opposition to the new materialistic culture of the Renaissance.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 254-255.

sacrificed much for his faith, but this does not automatically preclude his being a ‘Renaissance- man’. An analysis of some of the leading Gentile, and Jewish, thinkers of the period instantly reveals that they did not all conform to a single pattern, but differed widely in spiritual orientation. As already noted, Erasmus and Reuchlin remained Catholic, notwithstanding the Reformation and the growing advance of secularism. Other examples are Thomas More, one-time English Lord Chancellor, and the Polish monk/astronomer Copernicus, who overturned the geocentric system accepted for centuries throughout Christendom. Protestantism likewise produced many humanists, e.g. the eminent Dutch jurist and founding father of international law, Hugo Grotius who, interestingly, not only displays knowledge of Judaism and Jewish sources, but also shows appreciation of Abrabanel’s political views and cites him as a distinguished authority in his classic work ‘*De jure belli et pacis*’.<sup>107</sup> Finally, there were also secular humanists, like Machiavelli.

What distinctively characterises the Renaissance is thus *not* its discarding of religion, but an open-minded attitude towards various differing ideas and modes of thought, some being more radical than others. The typical Renaissance man is conversant with classical literature, has a sense of historical perspective, displays interest in the sciences, particularly astronomy and medicine, and appreciates art, music, and poetry.

Most Abrabanel scholars challenge Netanyahu’s ‘medievalist’ conception of him. One of these is the 20th century Judeo-German historian Baer, who puts the matter succinctly thus:

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<sup>107</sup> H. Grotius: *De jure belli et pacis* 1 (Paris, 1625) Ch.1 Sect. 6.

‘Abrabanel was the first among the Jews who added the views of the Renaissance to those of traditional Judaism and began to see tradition through the illuminating mirror of a humanistic historical concept’.<sup>108</sup>

This balanced view is fully shared by Sarachek, who acknowledges that Abrabanel was ‘imbued with the Renaissance spirit’, offering as an example the way he analyses the Song of the Sea in Exodus as a piece of poetry, and observing that ‘throughout his writings there is manifest the point of view of a literary critic’.<sup>109</sup>

Likewise, Gaon observes that Abravanel, in his commentary to Tractate Avot, which he dedicated to his son Samuel, ‘while urging the latter not to forget the law of God...reminds him that Judaism does not neglect the study of natural sciences and metaphysics’.<sup>110</sup> Gaon also perceptively remarks:

‘Abravanel refuted certain concepts of the Renaissance when they were in opposition to the Torah, but when they were not, he used them for the interpretation of Jewish life and for the purposes of scholarship’.<sup>111</sup>

As for Netanyahu’s labelling of Abrabanel as a mystic,<sup>112</sup> he does admittedly incorporate some mystical elements, such as reincarnation, within his writings.<sup>113</sup> But this is simply because, like many other thinkers, he had imbibed the intellectual

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<sup>108</sup> Y.Baer: *Toledot Ha-Yehudim bi’Sefarad Ha-Notzrit* (Tel Aviv, 1945) 245.

<sup>109</sup> Sarachek: Abravanel, 26.

<sup>110</sup> S.Gaon: ‘Abravanel and the Renaissance’ in: *Studi Sull’ Ebraismo Italiano* (1974)136.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.137.

<sup>112</sup> See p.55 & fn.106.

<sup>113</sup> Abrabanel: *Commentary to Numbers & Deuteronomy: Commentary to Deuteronomy* (Jerusalem, 1964) 230-233.

currents prevalent within contemporary mainstream Judaism.<sup>114</sup> He declares several times in his commentaries: '*I have no concern with the (Torah's) hidden mysteries*' – hardly the assertion of an enthusiastic Kabbalist!<sup>115</sup> Besides his references to reincarnation, Abrabanel's exegetical works display virtually no mystical tendencies. Even his messianism is based on what he considers firm biblical and *aggadic* foundations – apocalyptic, admittedly, but invariably clear and coherent, never losing himself in abstruse mystical language or surrendering to flights of fancy. Moreover, he seems occasionally to employ aspects of the Kabbalah – citing the Zohar, albeit sparingly – as a useful foil to the philosophers' excessive rationalism, which he dislikes and desires to combat with every available weapon.

Turning now to his specifically Jewish education, the communal rabbi of Lisbon during Isaac's youth was R. Joseph Hayyim (Hayyun) under whom he studied Talmud,<sup>116</sup> consulting him on various *halakhic* problems.<sup>117</sup> However, Hayyun was also a biblical scholar, imbued with Renaissance modes of thought, and a thoroughgoing advocate of the Bible's contextual meaning; and Abrabanel's exceptional knowledge of and interest in Scripture was probably due to the inspiration drawn from his early mentor in this field. The renowned Spanish exile, Joseph Jabez, mentions, in his 'Or Hayyim' composed after 1492, Hayyun's former Bible study group in Lisbon.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Waxman: History of Jewish Literature 2, 48; Sarachek: Abravanel, 117.

<sup>115</sup> Sarachek: Abravanel, 117.

<sup>116</sup> A.J.Reines: 'Abrabanel, Isaac b. Judah' in: Encyclopedia Judaica 2, ed. C. Roth & G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1972) 103.

<sup>117</sup> Ed: 'Hayyun, Joseph b. Abraham' in: Encyclopedia Judaica 7, 1514.

<sup>118</sup> J. Jabez: Or Hayyim (Prezemysl, 1873) 95; A.Gross: Hayyun, R. Joseph b. Abraham (Ramat Gan, 1996) 106-107.

Abrabanel matured intellectually very early; while still only about 20, he composed his first classic work, ‘Ateret Zekenim’, a treatise on Divine Providence and prophecy, and several years later he was delivering regular public discourses on Deuteronomy in the local synagogue. The notes he made for those lectures formed the basis for his subsequent commentary, ‘Mirkevet ha-Mishneh’ (‘The Chariot of Deuteronomy’).<sup>119</sup> This was commenced by him while still in Lisbon, though completed only long afterwards, during his residence in the Neapolitan Kingdom after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.<sup>120</sup>

We know, from Abrabanel himself<sup>121</sup> and Hayyun, that during his intensive study of Deuteronomy, he had posed a fundamental problem to his mentor about its essential nature and purpose, which he had previously raised in vain with many other scholars, as Hayyun himself acknowledged.<sup>122</sup> The very nature of the difficulty raised by the youthful Abrabanel is indicative of his radical mindset, propensity for unconventional thinking and challenging traditional assumptions. Abrabanel naturally knew that, according to rabbinic tradition, encapsulated by Maimonides in his Eighth Principle of Faith, the entire Pentateuch, in its present form, was identical to that transmitted by Divine dictation to Moses. But he was troubled by the fact that Deuteronomy’s opening words, and most of its succeeding phraseology, are written by Moses in the first person, without the standard introductory phrase ‘And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying’, employed throughout Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Deuteronomy thus purports to be Moses’ own composition, based on his original orations delivered to

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<sup>119</sup> Generally, though erroneously, translated ‘Second Chariot’.

<sup>120</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Deuteronomy, 3; Hesqeto: Introduction to Abrabanel: Ma’ayanei ha-Yeshu’ah (Jerusalem, 1960) 269.

<sup>121</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Deuteronomy, 4.

<sup>122</sup> J. Hayyun: Ma’amar Maggid Mishneh [pub. A. Gross in: Michael 11 (Jerusalem, 1989) 23-33].

the Israelites before his death. How, then, queried Abrabanel, could this final Book of the Pentateuch logically be equal in authority and sanctity with the preceding ones, which apparently constitute Divine dictation? The implications of this question were profound, for logic suggested the downgrading of Deuteronomy to the status of the prophetic books, thus driving a fundamental wedge through the entire structure of traditional Judaism. The way Abrabanel resolved the problem - that Moses had verbally explained the precepts mentioned in Deuteronomy to Israel before his death, and then God commanded him to inscribe them in the Torah in the language Moses had himself employed - testifies equally to his adherence to tradition and capacity for independent thought.<sup>123</sup>

As aforementioned, Hayyun was both Talmudist and biblical scholar, and it is evident from all the rabbinic citations in Abrabanel's exegetical and philosophical writings that he (Abrabanel) was thoroughly versed in the Oral Law. He cites both Talmuds, a variety of *midrashic* material, and the Zohar (the leading *kabbalistic* work, appearing in the late 13th century). Significantly, in his pentateuchal commentaries, he tackles the legislative portions in a manner indicating his total familiarity with the relevant rabbinic *halakhah*. The fact that he posed Talmudic queries to Hayyun has already been noted. Admittedly, he is not nowadays primarily renowned as a Talmudist, and indeed Minkin opines in this connection: 'Abravanel's knowledge of the Talmud (was) not outstanding, (though it) was sufficient' (to enable him to write a fresh, traditional biblical commentary); but nonetheless, within contemporary orthodox circles, he is reckoned among the 'Rishonim' ('Early Authorities') i.e. biblical and/or Talmudic commentators living between c.1000-1500; or, at least, accorded the status

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<sup>123</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Deuteronomy, 6.

of a *makhri'a* (an authority of sufficient stature to decide definitively between the conflicting views of two or more earlier Rishonim).<sup>124</sup> Moreover, Abrabanel is described by no less a *halakhic* authority than the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, R. Joseph Karo, in his commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, 'Kesef Mishneh', and in his 'Bet Yosef', as 'the great eagle' (an accolade generally reserved for Maimonides himself).<sup>125</sup>

Though Abrabanel had received his Jewish education from private tutors, years later, in 1491, he attended the Yeshivah of the renowned Rabbi Isaac Aboab II, 'the last Gaon of Castile', in Guadalajara, with whom he studied. Aboab was an outstanding Talmudic and biblical, scholar, who had formerly headed the major Yeshivah in Toledo, and authored Talmudic *novellae*, a commentary on Jacob b. Asher's *halakhic* Code ('Tur'), super-commentaries on Rashi's and Nahmanides' pentateuchal commentaries, and a series of homilies . Karo himself described Aboab as one of the greatest scholars of his time.<sup>126</sup> However, Abrabanel's brief contact with him took place only at age 54. Thus Aboab was probably not a major influence upon him, though his exposure to the Academy would undoubtedly have increased his Talmudic acumen. Karo interestingly informs us that Abrabanel was present amongst a gathering of the leading Spanish scholars in Aboab's Yeshivah when a most complex *halakhic* question came before them for consideration.<sup>127</sup> Abrabanel would additionally have witnessed the composition there, by Aboab and his disciples, of super-commentaries on Rashi's pentateuchal commentary. One instinctively feels

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<sup>124</sup> Minkin: Abarbanel, 59.

<sup>125</sup> J. Karo: *Kesef Mishneh* to Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, I, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 3:8 (Jerusalem, 1982) 112; *Bet Yosef* to *Tur*, *Orah Hayyim* 168 (Jerusalem, 1999) 165-166.

<sup>126</sup> Waxman: History of Jewish Literature 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (N.Y.1943) 282.

<sup>127</sup> Karo: *Kesef Mishneh* to *Mishneh Torah*: *Hilkhot Berakhot* 3:8. See fn.123.

that, besides his early exposure to the teaching of Hayyun, who had whetted his appetite for biblical and rabbinic learning, Abrabanel was largely self-taught in these areas. Intellectually outstanding, he possessed an unusually independent mind, and an extraordinary facility for intense concentration and hard work, in both academic and practical spheres.

### 3. Family Life

One of the strange facts about Abrabanel, from the biographer's perspective, is the absence of any record of his marriage. Just as in the case of his mother, noted above, we have no knowledge of his wife's identity or her family. This is fairly understandable, given the generally subordinate position of women in that period, within both Jewish and Gentile society. Presumably his father ensured that he married into a family of excellent pedigree and reputation. In any event, we know that he married relatively young, as there is a record of the birth of his eldest son, Judah, in Lisbon in 1460, when Isaac was about twenty-three. He had two further sons, Joseph and Samuel, born in Lisbon in 1471 and 1473 respectively, and at least two daughters.<sup>128</sup>

### 4. Rise to Fame and Political Career

#### 4.1 Abrabanel as Statesman in Lisbon (1465-1483)

Isaac engaged extensively and successfully in private commerce and state finance, following his father's pattern, eventually succeeding him as leading financier and State Treasurer to Alfonso upon Judah's death in 1471. It was then that he acquired

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<sup>128</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 16, citing Second Letter of Abrabanel to Yehiel of Pisa, dated 1482, pub.D. Kaufmann in: *Revue des Etudes Juives* 26 (1893)104.

the honorific title ‘Don’ (‘Lord’). By this time he had accumulated immense wealth, through his paternal inheritance and his own acquisitions.<sup>129</sup> He once contributed 10% of a total loan of twelve million *reals* to the State raised from both Jews and Christians.<sup>130</sup> Due to his wealth and political status, his charming personality and amiable nature,<sup>131</sup> he gradually developed very close contacts with high-ranking members of the Portuguese nobility, and particularly with the Herzog of Braganza, Alfonso’s kinsman.<sup>132</sup> He also befriended the scholar Joao Sezira, Alfonso’s powerful courtier, on one occasion persuading him to intervene with the Pope to have Portuguese Jewry relieved of certain civic disabilities.<sup>133</sup> Alfonso exempted Abrabanel from the general obligation imposed on all Jews to wear a distinctive badge, as a mark of his special favour.<sup>134</sup> Still extant, in the Portuguese royal archives, is the text of the aforementioned Letter of Consolation written by Abrabanel to his close aristocratic associate, the Count of Faro.<sup>135</sup> Finally, Netanyahu and Lawee suggest that Abrabanel may have known Fernao Lopes,<sup>136</sup> the first and greatest of the Portuguese chroniclers, royal archivist and secretary to Abrabanel’s father’s client, Prince Fernando.<sup>137</sup> These connections were to stand him, and hence the Jewish community, in good stead for many years at Court, though, as explained below, by a cruelly ironic twist of fate, they ultimately caused his political downfall and enforced departure from Portugal.

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<sup>129</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2; Introduction to Zevah Pesah (Constantinople, 1505) 2a; C. Gebhardt: *Regesten zur Lebensgeschichte Leone Ebreo* (Heidelberg, 1929) 37 (citing the death sentence passed on him *in absentia* by Joao II in 1484, where he is described as ‘a very rich man, and a holder of many lands’).

<sup>130</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 25.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 51&52.

<sup>132</sup> S. Dubnov: *History of the Jews* 3 (New Jersey & London, 1969) 314.

<sup>133</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 19.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 269.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 23; Cohen-Skall: ‘The Dual Humanism of Don Isaac Abravanel’, 14-15; 151-171.

<sup>136</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 14; Lawee: *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance towards Tradition* (Albany, 2002) 34.

<sup>137</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 14.

Throughout this period, Abrabanel assumed the responsibilities of a traditional Jewish communal lay-leader. He headed a ransom committee for the 250 Moroccan Jews captured during the Portuguese army's successful assault on the town of Arzilla and brought to Portugal,<sup>138</sup> and raised the enormous sum demanded for their release.<sup>139</sup> (Incidentally, this involved him in extensive cross-country travel, visiting local Jewish communities to inspire them with enthusiasm for the task.) Furthermore, he was active in all major charitable enterprises both within the Lisbon Jewish community and beyond. He maintained close contacts with Yehiel of Pisa, liaising with him several times to raise money for the ransom of captives and other charitable purposes. Notably, Abrabanel's wife (a shadowy figure of whom virtually nothing is known), once sent Yehiel's wife a black slave owned by her, as a gift.<sup>140</sup>

It is of interest that Abrabanel, in conjunction with a wealthy Marrano acquaintance, Luis de Santangel, and other Conversos, gave Queen Isabella 1,200,000 *maravedis* to help finance Columbus's pioneer voyage to the Indies. Thus Abrabanel was, effectively, one of Columbus's first financial supporters.<sup>141</sup>

Although spatial considerations preclude a comprehensive description of all Abrabanel's multifarious activities between 1465 and 1481 (the year of Alfonso's

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<sup>138</sup> See pp.53-54 & fn.98.

<sup>139</sup> Cohen-Skallie: Isaac Abravanel: Letters: 109,111, 113, 115.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 42, 51. The slave was a nine-year old girl from Guinea, a record of whose name in the local notarial register has survived. The register of the notary, Sir Giuliano del Pattiore, for 1473/74, found in the Archivio di Stato of Florence (Notarile Antecosmiano n.16471) records the gift of a slave thus: 'sclavam unam negram nomine Biccinae de Guinea da Terra Nova, etatis annorum otto vel novem, nondum baptizzata'. Ironically, whilst the slave-girl's name is known, that of Abrabanel's own wife, her original owner, is not!

<sup>141</sup> Saracheck: Abravanel, 29, 45.

death), it is noteworthy that he subsequently recalled those years as the happiest of his life, reminiscing nostalgically:

*'I lived peacefully in my house, which was filled with the treasures of my ancestors, in the famous city of Lisbon – the mother of Portuguese cities. God had blessed me with wealth, honour and...all the joys of human life. My house served as a gathering place for scholars, where books, authors, elegant taste, knowledge and godliness were discussed. I was lucky enough to work at the Court of the righteous ruler Don Alfonso – during whose reign the Jews enjoyed freedom and security'.<sup>142</sup>*

The extent of Abrabanel's political influence in the country is confirmed by Ribeiro dos Santos, who writes:

'There did not exist any serious undertaking, especially military, in which the king did not ask for his opinion; in such undertakings he frequently employed him in important tasks and bestowed upon him many honours'.<sup>143</sup>

Schorsch, a contemporary authority on early modern Sephardi Jewish history and culture, revealingly states, regarding Abrabanel's wealth and status in Portugal:

'In 1472, he received permission to live in Lisbon outside of the Jewish quarter. In 1478, the Duke and Duchess of Braganza made him a gift of a country house outside Lisbon. He also owned at least six houses in the Jewish quarter'.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

<sup>143</sup> A. Ribeiro dos Santos: Memorias da Academia 2 (Lisbon, 1812) 89.

<sup>144</sup> J. Schorsch: Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World (Cambridge, 2004) 38.

There are few instances of other individual Court Jews, certainly amongst Abrabanel's contemporaries, on the Iberian Peninsula, who attained such an elevated status as he did. One obvious case in point is that of Don Abraham Seneor, in Spain, known as the 'Rab de la Corte', whose status and position were higher than Abrabanel's, but one has to go back to the previous century to find a comparable figure – Don Samuel Abulafia.

This tranquil period ended abruptly with Alfonso's untimely death in 1481. He was succeeded by his son Joao II, a strong ruler but a man of vastly different temperament, whom Abrabanel later portrayed in very sinister terms.<sup>145</sup> Joao aimed to crush the nobility's power and centralise government in his own hands. Once his intentions had become clear, he found himself confronted, in 1483, with a rebellion of the leading aristocracy, spearheaded by his brother-in-law, the Duke of Braganza, and the Count of Faro (both Abrabanel's intimate friends) and supported by the Castilian government, with a view to deposing him, which he swiftly and ruthlessly crushed. The Duke of Braganza was duly arrested, and subsequently executed.

Joao's court officials, deeply envying Abrabanel's wealth and elevated position, and despising him for his alien religion, slandered him to the king, alleging his involvement in the conspiracy. Knowing that the evidence against him was extremely shaky, they persuaded Joao that the mere fact of Abrabanel's close relationship with the major conspirators indicated his complicity in their evil designs. However, in light of his reiterated, unqualified condemnation of regicide in his biblical commentaries,

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<sup>145</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2-3.

this presumption is extremely unlikely.<sup>146</sup> Whilst admittedly his condemnation on his commentary to Samuel was written after the deposition plot, and thus hardly provides clear evidence that he was not party to the conspiracy, his original commentary to Deuteronomy, where this condemnation also appears, had been composed earlier, whilst he was still resident in Portugal.

Abrabanel was summoned to attend forthwith upon the king at the royal palace, and unsuspectingly set out on his journey. He informs us that, whilst lodging overnight at an inn, he received a warning from one of his friends at court that the king had issued a warrant for his arrest, whereupon he realised that he had no alternative but promptly to flee for his life.<sup>147</sup> He travelled through the night towards the nearest part of the Castilian border, where he arrived the following evening. As he shrewdly surmised, a posse had been despatched in pursuit of him instantly upon his failure to arrive at the palace on time. On reaching the border town of Segura, he disclosed his identity, promptly seeking political asylum as a Portuguese refugee. As a diplomatic personage renowned in Castile, then involved in bitter ongoing political rivalry with Portugal, this was promptly granted.

#### 4.2 Asylum in Castile

Segura belonged to the district of Plasencia, and we have reason to believe that Abrabanel promptly proceeded to the nearby city of Plasencia, which had a sizeable Jewish community. He informs us of his discourses on the Former Prophets given shortly after his arrival in Castile, which his audience urged him to commit to

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<sup>146</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 171; Commentary to Samuel, 278, 310, 322.

<sup>147</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

writing.<sup>148</sup> He also dispatched urgent messages to his family, whom he had to abandon in Portugal, urging them to leave that country as soon as possible, taking as many of their belongings as possible with them. He soon heard from his Portuguese friends that, in his absence, Joao had appropriated all his possessions. When recounting this shortly afterwards, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, he employs apposite Talmudic legal terminology to describe the comprehensive scope of the appropriation –‘*karka’ai agav metaltelai*’ (‘my lands along with my moveable chattels’).<sup>149</sup>

Naturally enough, Abrabanel wrote to Joao protesting his innocence, and complaining against the injustice done to him, in the hope of clearing his name and retrieving his possessions.<sup>150</sup> His protest was in vain insofar as recovery of his goods was concerned, though it did temporarily create some doubt in Joao’s mind as to his culpability.<sup>151</sup> He accordingly permitted Abrabanel’s family to leave Portugal unmolested, which he would not have done if certain of his guilt. (Somewhat later, through discreet diplomacy, Abrabanel also succeeded in transferring some of his fortune to Castile.) However, this scarcely concluded the matter, since Abrabanel’s enemies at the Portuguese court - Joao’s new-fangled friends and advisors, who had replaced the old nobility - coveted his immense wealth, and calculated that, if they could convince the king that he was indeed a traitor, they might be rewarded for their loyalty with some of his possessions. They accordingly stressed to Joao that Abrabanel’s peremptory flight proved his complicity in the deposition plot, which

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<sup>148</sup> Idem: Commentaries to Joshua and Judges, 91&161 respectively. The extant Commentaries to Joshua, Judges and Samuel presumably reflect the content of those lectures.

<sup>149</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 34.

sounded plausible. They further fabricated evidence against him that he had participated in a secret meeting of the nobles, with the Duke of Braganza and the Marquis of Montemor, when he had informed them, from his expert knowledge of the royal finances, that the king could raise only a paltry sum to resist a rebellion, urging them to proceed, and giving assurances that he would pay the Castilian mercenaries they planned to hire to assist them. Naturally, no-one at court dared to defend a stigmatised traitor.<sup>152</sup>

Shortly afterwards, a fresh charge was levelled against Abrabanel, that, while on Castilian soil, he had collaborated with the Duke of Braganza's brother (now the rebels' spokesman in Castile) in yet another nobles' conspiracy against Joao. This time they even claimed that the rebel leaders had ordered Abrabanel to return secretly to Portugal to arrange for his nephew and son-in-law, Joseph Abrabanel, to grant them funds from Isaac's assets there. For Isaac to have involved himself in any further conspiracy whilst still hoping to recover his property would have been madness! However, as Netanyahu conjectures, some thoughtless activities on Joseph's part may have played into the hands of Isaac's enemies.<sup>153</sup> In any event, in May 1485 a death sentence was passed on him *in absentia*, extinguishing any lingering hope he might have entertained of retrieving the remainder of his possessions, now formally confiscated by royal decree.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 35-36.

Several authorities, e.g., the 17th century Italian ecclesiastic, Hebraist and theological/political writer Bartolocci,<sup>155</sup> and the 20th century historians de Carvalho,<sup>156</sup> Gebhardt,<sup>157</sup> Baer<sup>158</sup> and Baron,<sup>159</sup> either insist that, despite Abrabanel's vehement and constant protestations of innocence, he was actually involved in the nobles' conspiracy to some degree, or simply gloss over the matter. They evidently take Joao's verdict, as opposed to Abrabanel's protestation of his innocence, at face value, contending that, had Abrabanel really been innocent, he would not peremptorily have fled the country. Furthermore, they contend that Abrabanel himself admitted his prior discussions with the nobles concerning the lawfulness of assassinating a tyrannical ruler. Although it is hard, knowing Abrabanel's and Joao's respective characters, to accept these historians' conclusions, particularly given Abrabanel's own explicit protestations of his innocence and insistence in his commentaries that it is always unlawful to kill even tyrants, he may nonetheless be legitimately criticised for failing to report the intended conspiracy to the king on becoming aware of it.<sup>160</sup> Minkin acknowledges that he was not actively involved in the conspiracy, but considers he was over-friendly with the Duke of Braganza; this seems a balanced assessment.<sup>161</sup> Whether Abrabanel's silence merited the death penalty and confiscation of all his possessions is, naturally, a very different matter.

Reverting to 1483, once Abrabanel was firmly ensconced in Castile, commuting between Segura and Plasencia, and then, according to some historians, settling in

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<sup>155</sup> Bartolocci: *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica* 3 (Rome, 1683) 874.

<sup>156</sup> J. de Carvalho: *Leao Hebreu, Filosofo* (Coimbra, 1918)14, where he accuses Abrabanel of having been 'an active collaborator and diligent organiser' in the rebellion against Joao.

<sup>157</sup> C.Gebhardt: *Regesten*, 35.

<sup>158</sup> Baer: *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, II, (JPS, Philadelphia, 1966). 494-495.

<sup>159</sup> S.Baron: *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* 10 (N.Y. & London, 1965) 206.

<sup>160</sup> Abrabanel: *Introduction to Commentary to Joshua*, 2.

<sup>161</sup> Minkin: *Abarbanel*, 80-82.

Toledo, he now determined to dedicate his spare time to God's service.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, he tells us that he felt he had sinned by devoting so much time to the service of earthly rulers, whilst neglecting his spiritual welfare, and that his enforced flight from his native land and the loss of his fortune was an appropriate Divine punishment.<sup>163</sup> He accordingly redoubled his literary efforts, and, over the next five months – between October 1483 and March 1484- completed elaborate commentaries on the books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel, comprising about 300,000 words (an average of some 2,000 words daily). Despite his experiencing little disturbance throughout this period, this remains a stupendous intellectual achievement, considering the absence of modern technical aids. These commentaries, which, besides their high literary quality, contain many original ideas, rank amongst Abrabanel's greatest works, and testify to his innate genius and powers of concentration. Lawee indeed maintains that his commentaries on Joshua-Kings offer perhaps the earliest example of Renaissance stimulus in works of Hebrew literature composed beyond Italy.<sup>164</sup>

Netanyahu believes that Abrabanel chose to comment at this juncture on these particular books, rather than to complete the commentary on Deuteronomy he had commenced many years earlier, because the political elements and themes contained within them afforded him the best opportunity to develop his own firm ideas on monarchical institutions and governmental structures.<sup>165</sup> This view has much in its favour, and in particular, the passage in 1 Samuel 8, recording the prophet's vehement opposition to the Israelites' proposed appointment of a king (to be discussed more fully below) dovetailed neatly with Abrabanel's own cynicism about absolute rulers,

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<sup>162</sup> Waxman: History of Jewish Literature 2, 45; Saracheck: Abravanel, 39.

<sup>163</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Lawee: 'Abravanel, Isaac' in: Encyclopedia of the Renaissance I, ed.P.F.Grendler (N.Y.1999) 1-2.

<sup>165</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 37.

based on his recent experiences in Portugal. (One cannot help wondering whether his extreme anti-monarchical stance had been further shaped by the extraordinary events contemporaneously unfolding in England – Richard III’s usurpation of the throne in July 1483, and subsequent complicity in the murder of his two nephews, the elder of whom was the legitimate heir to the crown – crimes sending shockwaves throughout Western Europe.)<sup>166</sup> We may, however, suggest two additional motives for Abrabanel’s decision: first, writing on the Prophets, rather than the Pentateuch, freed him from certain dogmatic constraints, thus allowing him more scope for independent interpretations; secondly, he may have felt that there was a greater need for commentaries on the prophetic literature, which had received significantly less exegetical attention than the Pentateuch.

Be that as it may, he states that, as he was about to commence his commentary to Kings, he was invited by the joint Sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, to a royal audience with a view to his prospective appointment in governmental service.<sup>167</sup> Netanyahu maintains, albeit without proof, that it was Abrabanel himself who had initiated the necessary moves to secure such a meeting, through his friends at the Spanish Court.<sup>168</sup> However, the overall logic of the situation suggests rather that it was a gratuitous decision by the Sovereigns (who may have heard either from Abraham Seneor, Spanish Jewry’s formal representative to the government, or, as Netanyahu suggests, from the exiled Princes of Braganza, now ensconced at the Spanish court, of his outstanding reputation as politician and financier), and who were

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<sup>166</sup> Whilst he admittedly makes no mention of this episode, he refers to England several times in his Commentaries, in various different contexts, indicating his general awareness of events occurring there.

<sup>167</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Kings, 422.

<sup>168</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 38, 40.

also presumably attracted by his current status as political refugee, which would virtually guarantee his loyalty to his new hosts.<sup>169</sup> With hostility existing at this time between Spain and Portugal, economic rivals, and the Spanish royal finances in a parlous state, the Sovereigns clearly needed Abrabanel as much as he needed them for the re-establishment of his career.

An important psychological issue arises here, demanding consideration. Reference has been made to Abrabanel's profound regret at having expended his energies in the service of the Portuguese ruler, who had repaid his loyalty with base ingratitude. Combined with this had been the feeling that he had grievously sinned against God by his lengthy neglect of Torah study. Why, then, did he abandon his contrition so readily at the first opportunity? Surely it diminishes his spiritual stature, and even suggests hypocrisy on his part? This question will confront us again in the context of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry Jews some eight years later, and, subsequently, upon his enforced departure from Naples in the wake of a French invasion. This theme, persisting throughout Abrabanel's career, cannot be lightly dismissed.

The adage 'Man is full of contradictions' appears at least partially relevant here. Whilst Abrabanel was undoubtedly a highly spiritual individual, he was also intensely practical, energetic and ambitious, and felt an overwhelming urge to accomplish certain goals he had voluntarily set himself. It must also be recalled that he had been born into a family of leading financiers and businessmen, thus inheriting commercial talent. Moreover, he had his father's example to follow as communal leader and philanthropist. Whilst appreciating the importance of wealth creation, he never lost

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 40.

sight of the moral and religious obligation financially to assist those less fortunate than himself. For him, genuine piety combined Torah study with charitable works ('*gemilut hasadim*'). Abstract mystical speculation was totally alien to his nature.

It is probable that, despite his initial pangs of conscience, Abrabanel ultimately felt able to reconcile his worldly yearnings with his religious outlook in the traditional Sephardi manner. Had not the ancient rabbis taught

'Torah study is most worthy when accompanied by some mundane occupation, for exertion in both of these causes sin to be forgotten'?<sup>170</sup>

Furthermore, the Talmud had recorded a famous difference of opinion between the disciples of R. Ishmael and R. Shim'on b.Yohai.<sup>171</sup> Whilst the former had, on principle, combined Torah study with a trade or profession, the latter had insisted exclusively on Torah learning. Moreover, the Talmud had recorded that whilst many adopting R. Ishmael's path had succeeded, numerous others, selecting R. Shim'on's, had not.

The initial interview between Abrabanel and the Sovereigns, in March 1484, proved a genuine turning-point in Abrabanel's political career.

#### 4.3 The Spanish Phase (1483-1492)

In 1480, Ferdinand and Isabella had introduced the Inquisition into Spain and its dominions, and although officially directed against the 'Conversos' (or Marranos, as

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<sup>170</sup> Mishnah: Avot 2:2.

<sup>171</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 35b; Sifre: Deuteronomy 11:14.

they were contemptuously called) - Jews forcibly or voluntarily converted to Christianity, there were already signs, by the time of Abrabanel's arrival in Spain in 1483, that the relative tolerance towards those openly professing Judaism was fast dissipating. This was largely due to the Sovereigns' ardent desire to centralise government, thereby shattering the traditional power of the feudal nobility. To achieve this purpose, the Crown needed to ally itself with the burgeoning urban middle classes, who shared its dislike for the remaining relics of feudal power, and who were particularly hostile to the Jews as commercial rivals. Yet another alarming sign of the increasingly hostile atmosphere was the expulsion of the Jews from the entire province of Andalusia in 1481, by royal edict.<sup>172</sup>

It thus seems superficially strange why Abrabanel, a shrewd observer of prevailing political trends, should have been so ready to offer his services to the Spanish Crown in such circumstances.<sup>173</sup> Several cogent explanations may be suggested. First, Ferdinand had a streak of Jewish blood running through his veins, on the maternal side.<sup>174</sup> Second, his marriage to Isabella of Castile had been arranged through Abraham Seneor the 'Rab de la Corte', leading tax-farmer, official Chief Rabbi and Spanish Jewry's representative.<sup>175</sup> Third, Spanish Jewry had initially welcomed the royal couple's accession, believing they would introduce a new spirit of toleration – and indeed, the first half of their reign had apparently confirmed such hopes. Jews (and Marranos) remained ensconced in various high positions within the royal service and the judiciary, continuing to be appointed as tax-farmers for the Crown throughout

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<sup>172</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 48.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 49-50.

<sup>174</sup> Sarachek: Abravanel, 41; N. Roth: *Conversos, Inquisition and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Wisconsin, 2002) 320. Ferdinand's mother was a grand-daughter of Paloma, a Castilian Jewess.

<sup>175</sup> Minkin: Abarbanel, 85-86; Baer: *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, II, 314, citing as his primary source Rabbi Isaac de Leon.

the realm, and remaining prominent in the Cortes (Parliament).<sup>176</sup> Finally, the Jews largely shared the Inquisition's suspicions of the Marranos' sincerity, albeit from opposing perspectives. Whilst the Inquisition suspected that they remained secretly devoted to Judaism and had formally adopted Christianity merely to secure improved social status, the Jews feared just the reverse, that the Marranos had sold their souls to the Church and despised their former co-religionists. Accordingly, Spanish Jewry was not overly concerned with the Inquisition's cruel treatment of the Conversos.<sup>177</sup> Finally, Abrabanel may well have felt that, in the circumstances, the best way to protect his fellow-Jews was to secure an influential court position. He presumably considered that, jointly with Seneor and the latter's wealthy son-in-law, Meir Melamed, much could be done to avert impending danger.

In any event, Abrabanel almost certainly, at his initial meeting, offered a comprehensive plan to the Sovereigns for alleviation of their severe financial problems. His proposals were welcomed, and he was promptly appointed as a tax-farmer working within Seneor's elaborate system. Ferdinand persisted with Abrabanel's appointment in 1484 notwithstanding the protests of Pope Sixtus IV.<sup>178</sup> His financial ability again proved itself, and the range of his activities throughout Spain soon expanded greatly. By 1488, these must have enriched him substantially, as we find repeated evidence thereafter of huge loans advanced by him to the Queen

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<sup>176</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 49.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 45-46.

<sup>178</sup> Sarachek: Abravanel, 40. It is unclear from where Sarachek obtains this information, as he cites no primary source and the point is not mentioned by Netanyahu. However, such protests on the part of the Pope are certainly consistent with his overall policy of hostility towards the Jews, evidenced by his issue of a bull on 31 May 1484 prohibiting Jews from dwelling together with Christians and proscribing other forms of social contact.

(whose personal financial adviser and commercial representative he had now become)<sup>179</sup> and the State's war treasury.<sup>180</sup>

Despite Abrabanel's immense wealth and elevated position, he never had as much influence over state policy in Spain as in Portugal. Whereas in Spain he was consulted solely on financial matters, in Portugal he had advised on all matters of state. Nonetheless, he succeeded, through his affable personality, in befriending several powerful figures close to the throne. He served several grandes of the House of Mendoza, including Cardinal Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, a leading sponsor of Castilian Renaissance scholarship.<sup>181</sup> He was eventually recognised as Spanish Jewry's chief court representative, largely eclipsing the aged Seneor, who, according to contemporary Hebrew chroniclers at any rate, was disliked by traditional Jews because of his religious laxity and mediocre intellectual attainments.<sup>182</sup>

Abrabanel's activities necessitated extensive travel across the country, and he accordingly had to relocate from time to time. He left Plasencia for Segovia; according to some, also residing temporarily in Toledo. In 1488, he is based at Alcala de Henares, and in 1491, at Guadalajara, where, as aforementioned, he briefly attended Aboab's Yeshivah and studied with him.

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<sup>179</sup> Baer, 362 & relevant fn.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid; Amador de los Rios: Historia 3, 295.

<sup>181</sup> Lawee: 'Abravanel, Isaac' in: Encyclopedia of the Renaissance 1, ed. P.F. Grendler (N.Y. 1999) 1.

<sup>182</sup> Baer, 314, citing Rabbi Isaac de Leon, who invented an evocative pun on Seneor's name – 'Seneor' is the equivalent of 'Soneh Or' – the enemy of light. See also Netanyahu, 52.

From 1487, Spanish Jewry's situation began to deteriorate rapidly. In that year, an order was made for their expulsion from the entire Kingdom of Aragon.<sup>183</sup> In 1489, the Inquisition commenced proceedings against the Jews of Huesca for alleged conversions of Christians (i.e. bringing about the reversion of Marranos) to Judaism, culminating in the burning at the stake of its communal leader. In 1490, there followed the Laguardia blood-libel, where again, the Inquisition's intervention led to a series of convictions and executions.<sup>184</sup> Beinart suggests that it was this incident that acted as a catalyst helping to forge favourable public opinion for the decisive step, the expulsion of the Jews from the entire realm, which had not been present until then.<sup>185</sup>

The time had now come for the final royal assault on Granada, the last Muslim stronghold on the Peninsula, for which campaign Abrabanel made a huge loan to the government. In the account books of Garcia Martinez and Pedro de Montemayor, dated 5 May 1492, appears an entry issued by Ferdinand to his treasurers to pay Abrabanel 1,500,000 *maravedis* for monies loaned by him in the Moorish wars, plus 1,140,000 *maravedis* for the sums he advanced to equip the caravels ordered by the Sovereigns for the Indies' expedition and to pay Columbus, Admiral of the Fleet.<sup>186</sup> Granada having fallen in January 1492, the Sovereigns, buoyed up by their success, now decided, according to Abrabanel at any rate, to express their gratitude to God by offering the Jews throughout their dominions the stark choice between conversion to Christianity and expulsion.<sup>187</sup> David Abulafia<sup>188</sup> endorses Netanyahu's view that the Sovereigns saw the decree of expulsion as a means to secure a further wave of

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<sup>183</sup> Netanyahu, 48. However, he states elsewhere (p.277 fn.329): 'It is questionable, however, whether the order was actually carried out, fully or partly'.

<sup>184</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 53.

<sup>185</sup> H. Beinart [Ed.] *The Sephardi Legacy 2* (Jerusalem, 1992) 25.

<sup>186</sup> Minkin: Abarbanel, 136. Minkin does not cite his primary source.

<sup>187</sup> Abrabanel: *Introduction to Commentary to Kings*, 422.

<sup>188</sup> D. Abulafia: *Spain and 1492: Unity and Uniformity under Ferdinand and Isabella* (Bangor, 1992) 42.

conversions to Christianity, as a result of which all the Conversos would automatically fall under the Inquisition's jurisdiction.<sup>189</sup> Norman Roth highlights Kapsali's statement in D'Bei Eliyahu that the Jews fully supported the royal campaign against Granada, rejoiced publicly at its success and praised the Sovereigns.<sup>190</sup> It is thus tragically ironic that Granada's conquest, achieved only through Abrabanel's and other prominent Jews' massive financial support, and enthusiastically welcomed both by Jews and Conversos, precipitated the decision taken for Jewish expulsion from Spain just two months later!

#### 4.4 The Edict of Expulsion

The Edict of Expulsion<sup>191</sup> had been carefully planned by Ferdinand and a coterie of his closest advisers in secret, and took both the masses of Spanish Jewry and its leaders totally by surprise. Abulafia maintains that the Jews were aware of a brewing crisis on the eve of 1492, but firmly believed they had the means to prevent it.<sup>192</sup> Abrabanel can hardly be blamed for his failure to foresee it, for, as Baron aptly notes, as late as January 1492, the Sovereigns were still concluding four-year contracts with Jewish tax-farmers, (either because they expected them to accept baptism and thus remain in service even after the expulsion, or to enrich themselves by confiscating the property of the 'voluntarily' departing agents under the guise of merely collecting their contractual obligations).<sup>193</sup> Beinart goes even further than Abulafia, stating, as he does: 'It is doubtful whether the Jews themselves were aware of what was in store for them. Only a few felt the pressure of the times, such as... those close to Kabbalistic

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<sup>189</sup> Netanyahu: *The Marranos of Spain from the late 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century according to contemporary Hebrew sources*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (N.Y. 1973).

<sup>190</sup> Roth: *Conversos, Inquisition and Expulsion*, 337.

<sup>191</sup> Strictly speaking, there was not a single Edict of Expulsion, as the Aragonese-Catalan text differed significantly from that issued in Castile. Its overall effect was, however, identical.

<sup>192</sup> Abulafia: *Spain and 1492*, 47.

<sup>193</sup> Baron: *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* 11 (N.Y. 1967) 238.

circles'.<sup>194</sup> The decree was signed in March 1492, but not promulgated until the end of April, due to Seneor's and Abrabanel's intervention with the King. They were granted three separate interviews with him, during which they pleaded for a rescission of the Edict.<sup>195</sup> We possess no precise record of what transpired on any of those occasions, but know that, at the second meeting, they offered Ferdinand a huge bribe, perhaps 300,000 golden ducats,<sup>196</sup> or, according to some, 30,000 ducats.<sup>197</sup> He remained non-committal, hinting that the edict reflected not only his will, but also the Queen's. Isabella herself offered them no encouragement, remaining unmoved by Abrabanel's stern lecture to her on the Jews' proven ability to survive all their oppressors' attempts to exterminate them.<sup>198</sup> She intimated that the final responsibility for the decision to expel the Jews lay with the King, rather than her. Whether or not she was being disingenuous is hard to say.<sup>199</sup>

Unfortunately, all Abrabanel's and Seneor's efforts were in vain; the Edict was sealed, and duly implemented. All Jews in Spain and its dominions were to leave the

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<sup>194</sup> Beinart: *The Sephardi Legacy*, 25.

<sup>195</sup> Abrabanel: *Introduction to Commentary to Kings*, 422; S. Ibn Verga: *Shevet Yehudah: ha-shemad ha-hamishim u'shnaim*, ed. A. Shohat (Jerusalem, 1947) 102-2; Kapsali: *D'Bei Eliyahu*, 71.

<sup>196</sup> Netanyahu: *Abravanel*, 55.

<sup>197</sup> Goodman: *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, 8.

<sup>198</sup> Abrabanel's representations are reported by Kapsali in *D'Bei Eliyahu*, 66, recording his relevant conversations with various Spanish exiles. An element of doubt must, however, exist as regards Kapsali's general reliability here, dependent, as he is, on hearsay evidence. Abrabanel himself, in the *Introduction to his Commentary to Kings*, refers to his appearances before the Sovereigns only in very general terms.. Kapsali asserts, *ibid.*71, not only that Abrabanel lectured Isabella on the theme of eternal Jewish survival, which seems plausible, but also that he sent her a barbed missive, just before his 'escape' from Spain, invoking Divine wrath against her and Ferdinand for their wickedness. This, however, is inconceivable, as Abrabanel, far from escaping from the country, left voluntarily, with dignity, after securing special financial concessions for himself and his family.

<sup>199</sup> Abulafia: *Spain and 1492*, 43, apparently accepts the conventional view that initially the driving force behind the Edict of Expulsion was Isabella, Ferdinand being more pragmatic. However, though this view is supported by Abrabanel's own words in the *Introduction to his Commentary to Kings*, it is contradicted by Netanyahu, and by Abrabanel's remarks included within the uncensored Sabbionetta edition of his *Commentary to Deuteronomy*. Beinart maintains that the joint Sovereigns were united in their views and equally responsible for the Edict ( Beinart: *The Sephardi Legacy*, 31-32).

country by 31 July, on pain of death if subsequently discovered on Spanish soil. The only alternative was conversion to Christianity. Some Jews, including Seneor and Melamed, chose that option. Abrabanel himself, because of his record of outstanding service to the Crown, was permitted to remain in the country as a Jew if he so desired, and tradition has it that the Sovereigns even allowed him to retain another nine Jews along with him, providing the requisite quorum for communal prayer. They were hoping that he, too, like Seneor, would convert, to enable him to remain royal Treasurer, and made strenuous efforts to persuade him to do so, but for Abrabanel, this was inconceivable. He voluntarily chose exile alongside his brethren, whom he refused to desert in their hour of spiritual crisis.

Abrabanel and his family accordingly prepared for departure. Clearly, his return to Portugal, as *persona non grata*, was precluded, and he opted for Italy, a European country with whose culture he was relatively familiar, rather than North Africa. He ensured that all debts due to him were collected, including a huge Crown debt. Although it was legally prohibited for anyone to remove gold, silver, coined money or jewellery from the country, Abrabanel shrewdly managed to save at least some of his fortune via bills of exchange, and by obtaining a special permit from Ferdinand for himself and his son-in-law to take out 2000 ducats each in gold and other valuables. In return for these privileges, he granted the Crown the right to collect for itself outstanding debts due to him.

These facts not only show how highly esteemed Abrabanel was by the royal couple, who now had nothing to gain by granting him such concessions, but also explain how he was relatively well-placed to commence his new life. He embarked with his family

from Valencia around 31 July 1492, leading a group bound for the Italian mainland, arriving in the Kingdom of Naples towards the end of September, where he sought and was granted refuge by Ferrante, the then Neapolitan ruler. The reason for the choice of Naples rather than the northern Italian states was simple: none of them would admit the Jewish exiles. Ferrante, however, wishing to ensure that his kingdom, an economic rival to the powerful Venetian Republic, remained a major player in the Italian political arena, instantly perceived the important contribution the Jews could make towards furtherance of his aims.<sup>200</sup>

#### 4.5 Reflective Analysis

Before concluding our account of Abrabanel's Spanish career, a fundamental question demands consideration. Ostensibly, he had failed as a politician, for, at the crucial moment, when his diplomatic skills and influence in the corridors of power had ultimately been put to the test, he had been unable to obtain revocation of the Edict of Expulsion, resulting in the worst calamity in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple. Is it perhaps arguable, then, that such a disappointing outcome highlights Abrabanel's personal limitations as a diplomat?

Netanyahu contends that no-one else in Abrabanel's position could have achieved any better result.<sup>201</sup> For Ferdinand, short-term financial considerations – the opportunity to appropriate all Jewish property at once and simultaneously be seen as the Church's loyal servant – were paramount, and he had calculated carefully. Niccolo Machiavelli indeed held that Ferdinand was motivated by *Realpolitik*, and 'had recourse to a pious cruelty', though Baer disagrees, claiming that religion was a dogmatic factor in its

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>201</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 89.

own right.<sup>202</sup> In this he is supported by Beinart, who cites Ferdinand's letter to the city of Barcelona, where he states that the Sovereigns wished to act for the sake of the Lord, a motivation which coincided with the good of the realm.<sup>203</sup> He further notes that Pope Alexander VI lauded the Sovereigns for the Expulsion, this being among the deeds for which they were awarded the title of 'Catholic Monarchs'. Moreover, Abrabanel was not the Jews' sole representative on this occasion; he was supported by Seneor, who had played a vital introductory role in Ferdinand's marriage to Isabella and assisted her on several further occasions, as well as by Seneor's son-in-law Abraham Melamed. It is hard to dissent from Netanyahu's view in this regard.

Moreover, I believe that even had Abrabanel succeeded in getting the Edict revoked, it would have ultimately made little difference to the fate of Spanish Jewry. The power and rigour of the Inquisition, fuelled by the extreme fanaticism of its spiritual head, Torquemada, the Sovereigns' personal confessor, would have continued unabated in any event, and the onslaught on the Marranos would, most likely, have spilt over onto the official Jewish community. Furthermore, the reactionary papal policy associated with the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Counter-Reformation would probably have engulfed Spanish Jewry in any event. Thus the most that could have been achieved was a short-term deferment of the catastrophe. Spanish Jewry was doomed, at least in the medium to long term, because of the intensive resurgence of militant Christianity on the Peninsula.

Minkin approaches the matter from a different angle, asking why Abrabanel failed to sense the impending disaster looming for his co-religionists and advise them well in

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<sup>202</sup> Baer, 441.

<sup>203</sup> Beinart: *The Sephardi Legacy*, 38.

advance to arrange to leave the country gradually. His answer is fourfold. First, he invokes Abrabanel's naturally optimistic nature and profound religious faith. Second, he points to Abrabanel's probable belief in the Spaniards' traditionally chivalrous spirit, which they had shown by their rejection of attempted papal interference in their affairs. Third, Rome itself had already shown displeasure at the Inquisition's excesses, and finally, there was no obvious safe haven for the Jews, as many European governments were overtly hostile to Jews for religious reasons.<sup>204</sup> The combined force of all these factors, plus the others already mentioned, appears sufficient to exonerate Abrabanel from a charge of irresponsibility.

One more important issue, raised by Netanyahu, requires investigation. He argues that Abrabanel, as a leader of Spanish Jewry, missed a crucial opportunity, in the wake of the Expulsion, to advocate wholesale emigration to Palestine, which could have been developed and re-colonised by the exiles *en masse*.<sup>205</sup> Instead, he chose an escapist approach, seeking refuge in mystical speculations concerning the imminent advent of the Messiah, ultimately leading nowhere.<sup>206</sup> Netanyahu here plainly views the matter from his own perspective as a modern secular Zionist, and appears guilty of anachronism. For it was impossible, given the state of international power politics at the time, for the Jews to have established permanent autonomous enclaves in Palestine, part of the Ottoman Empire, regarded by the Turks as Islamic territory. Whilst prepared to tolerate Jews in their domains, they certainly would not have

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<sup>204</sup> Minkin: Abarbanel, 120-121.

<sup>205</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 255- 256.

<sup>206</sup> Baer, 442, claims that the near-contemporary historian Solomon ibn Verga, writing in his *Shevet Yehudah*, some thirty years after the Expulsion, likewise failed to seek out new, real ways of national rebirth, contenting himself with the traditional religious framework common to all ages of Diaspora Jewry, beyond which he failed to penetrate, *Pace* Baer, however, we have already noted in our Introduction that Ibn Verga adopted a more sophisticated approach than that of the traditional pietists.

countenanced them wresting any portion of Islamic lands, especially Palestine, containing their third holiest shrine, in Jerusalem, from their control. The Jews had no military machine, nor could have expected any support from hostile Christendom. Indeed, the small-scale Jewish attempt at autonomous re-colonisation of some enclaves in and around Tiberias, initiated by the Duke of Naxos, a Turkish Jewish statesman, in the latter half of the 16th century, met with total failure, as Netanyahu himself admits.<sup>207</sup> The Jews themselves lacked enthusiasm for the project. Zionism would certainly have its day, but all the evidence suggests that Abrabanel's deep faith and messianic speculations was far more appropriate, and contributed enormously towards Sephardic Judaism's subsequent vibrant resurgence.

#### 4.6 Naples and Beyond (1492-1503)

Ferrante befriended the Jewish refugees, seeing them as useful natural supporters of his absolutist regime.<sup>208</sup> He, too, recognised Abrabanel's exceptional financial abilities, which could be harnessed in government service, and accordingly offered him a court position. Abrabanel subsequently recorded for posterity his happiness in Naples, mentioning that his wealth increased immensely and that he equalled the country's greatest magnates in fame. However, since his court duties were less absorbing than before, he again found time for literary endeavours, and some of his

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<sup>207</sup> Netanyahu, 256.

<sup>208</sup> In a lecture delivered by David Abulafia in Munich, 2005, entitled 'Royal Jews: The Jews of Southern Italy and Sicily in the Late Middle Ages', he pointed out that a fundamental change in general royal attitudes towards Jews occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Kingdom of Naples, when the King, benefiting from the Sicilian and Spanish expulsions, began to see himself not only as the 'possessor' but as the active protector of the Jews. The financial ability and artisan skills of the resident and arriving Jews were important preconditions for this new attitude of the monarchy . Henceforth a crime against the Jews was viewed as also a crime against the Crown.

most important works were composed there. By the end of 1493, he had completed his commentary to Kings, interrupted some nine years earlier on being summoned to the royal service. This biblical book, portraying the gradual decline and fall of the Israelite and Judean Kingdoms, culminating in destruction and exile, was, for Abrabanel, a highly appropriate theme on which to expatiate, given the contemporary parallel of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry. He accordingly insisted that such disasters should be perceived as Divine retribution for loss of faith and religious laxity. It is one of the typical features of Abrabanel's exegesis that he seeks to extract moral lessons from Scripture, and demonstrate its contemporary relevance.<sup>209</sup>

Abrabanel, however, felt that the exigencies of the situation demanded something further. Many of the exiles, still unable to adjust to the calamity that had befallen them, had begun to question Divine justice and lose their faith. He accordingly determined to compose a treatise explaining and vindicating the manner whereby God demonstrates his justice in this world. He also planned a companion volume offering historical support from past events to buttress his moral thesis. These works, however, were never completed, as more pressing matters invariably supervened, until his death in 1508 abruptly ended all his literary endeavours.<sup>210</sup>

Naples was a flourishing humanist centre, where Abrabanel must have felt culturally at home. It boasted a renowned humanist Academy, headed by Giovanni Pontano.<sup>211</sup> Its outstanding Jewish scholars included R. Judah Messer Leon, physician, philosopher and Renaissance savant (whose son David, a pious religious philosopher

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<sup>209</sup> Netanyahu, 65.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. 65-66.

<sup>211</sup> Lawee: 'Abravanel, Isaac' in: Encyclopedia of the Renaissance 1, 2.

and Kabbalist with humanist leanings, later became Abrabanel's bitter ideological opponent), and Elijah del Medigo, an Aristotelian/Maimonidean philosopher and Talmudist.<sup>212</sup> By the time Abrabanel arrived there, Naples had also become the greatest centre of Hebrew printing in Europe.<sup>213</sup>

One particularly important exile whom he almost certainly met in Naples was R. Isaac Arama, a leading pre-Expulsion Aragonese scholar, philosopher and moral preacher. We know this from the subsequent written testimony of Arama's son, Meir. The two men, whose spiritual and intellectual outlook was similar – both anti-Aristotelians sharing grave concern at the Spanish exiles' rampant assimilation - may have met at Abrabanel's home to discuss matters of mutual concern.<sup>214</sup> Meir later alleged that Abrabanel abused this connection to visit his father's home, gain access to his library, and copy numerous sections from his writings, particularly his most important homiletical/exegetical work, *Aqedat Yizhak*, which he subsequently incorporated wholesale into his own works, without acknowledging their true source.<sup>215</sup> This grave allegation of plagiarism was repeated by David Messer Leon.<sup>216</sup> The issue, because of its complexity, is not suitable for detailed discussion here. However, beside the fact that plagiarism was commonplace amongst writers in that era, not bearing the stigma of moral opprobrium attached to it nowadays, it should be borne in mind that Arama was primarily a homilist, rather than purely an exegete, with a more medieval mindset than Abrabanel, who did not fully share his intellectual horizons.

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<sup>212</sup> Netanyahu, 66.

<sup>213</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>214</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 295, fn.92, inferring this from Meir Arama's letter.

<sup>215</sup> M. Arama: Letter, pub. G. Polak in: Ha-Maggid 2, No. 25 [30.6.1858] 99.

<sup>216</sup> H.J. Polak: 'Introduction' in: Isaac Arama, *Aqedat Yishaq* 1 (Warsaw, 1882, rep. Jerusalem, 1960) 5-7.

Abrabanel was now again the victim of political events. After managing to dissuade Ferrante from expelling all Naples' fresh Jewish residents, whom the entire population suspected of being plague-carriers, the city was now being threatened with imminent invasion from both France and Spain. As neither would have tolerated the Jews, the situation was perilous. At this juncture, Ferrante died and was succeeded by his son Alfonso, to whom Abrabanel continued to show loyalty, becoming his most trusted courtier.

When Alfonso was forced to flee Naples, Abrabanel accompanied him. During his absence, the French sacked the town, pillaging the Jewish quarter, including Abrabanel's home. He records that his entire fortune was stolen and his precious library lost.<sup>217</sup>

Alfonso now informed Abrabanel of his decision to abdicate, thus leaving Abrabanel without royal protection.<sup>218</sup> This necessitated further peregrinations; he planned to head for Salonika, where his youngest son, Samuel, was studying. En route, he stopped off at Corfu, where there was an established exilic community. There he recovered a missing manuscript of his commentary to Deuteronomy, commenced by him years earlier, in Portugal, but lost on his enforced flight from that country.<sup>219</sup> He continued work on this commentary, also commencing one on Isaiah and another on Maimonides' Guide, 'Rosh Amanah'.<sup>220</sup> This was composed specifically to reinforce the local Jews' religious convictions and stem their moral indifferentism.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 68-69; Hesqeto: Introduction to Abrabanel: Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah (Jerusalem, 1960) 269, citing Abrabanel: Nahalat Avot (Constantinople, 1505) ch.4.

<sup>218</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 68.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.73.

<sup>220</sup> Abrabanel: Rosh Amanah (Principles of Faith) Eng. trans. with Introduction and notes, M.M.

At the end of 1495, hearing of French capitulation in Naples, where his extended family still lived, he returned to the Neapolitan kingdom, seeking refuge in Monopoli, a Venetian enclave in the Kingdom of Naples,<sup>222</sup> making it a safer refuge than the Kingdom proper at a time of great tumult. He remained there for seven years, during which he completed his commentary to Deuteronomy and composed some of his most famous and influential works, e.g. ‘Zevah Pesah’, (a commentary on the Passover Haggadah, dealing with the timely theme of redemption, and still popular today) and ‘Nahalat Avot’, in which he lamented the exiles’ increasing materialism and lack of moral compass, which he sought to combat by emphasising Judaism’s spiritual treasures. He also produced his magisterial messianic trilogy, ‘Ma’ayanei ha-Yeshu’ah’ (‘Fountains of Salvation’), ‘Yeshu’ot Meshiho’ (‘The Salvations of His Messiah’) and ‘Mashmi’a Yeshu’ah’ (‘Herald of Salvation’) to comfort his co-religionists with what he deemed irrefutable proofs of the Messiah’s imminent arrival and the final redemption. These works, presented as an extensive commentary to the apocalyptic Book of Daniel, inspired not only Abrabanel’s own contemporaries, but also many later generations, with genuine hope for the future.<sup>223</sup>

He subsequently reverted to philosophical themes, composing ‘Shamayim Hadashim’ - an attempt to demonstrate the theory of creation *ex nihilo* and co-ordinate it with Maimonides’ Guide.<sup>224</sup> He then finished his commentary to Isaiah, injecting a novel messianic element. In 1501, he produced his most important philosophical work,

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Kellner (Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation); Rutherford, N.J., London & Toronto, 1982).

<sup>221</sup> Baron: A Social and Religious History of the Jews 17 (N.Y.1980) 82.

<sup>222</sup> Netanyahu, 74.

<sup>223</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 73-78.

<sup>224</sup> Abrabanel: Shamayim Hadashim (Roedelheim, 1828).

‘Mif’alot Elohim’ which sought to prove and expound the principle of Divine power, supported on the basis of the possibility of miraculous heavenly redemption.<sup>225</sup>

At this point, Federigo, the new ruler of Naples, friendly to the Jews and Abrabanel’s family, issued a formal royal invitation to him and his son Judah to return there. But in the wake of a further, joint Franco-Spanish invasion of Naples, Abrabanel wisely decided to accept his son Joseph’s proposal, made after peace had been restored, to relocate to Venice, a foretaste of whose government he had already experienced whilst in Monopoli, a Venetian enclave.

#### 4.7 Venice – His Last Bow (1503-1508)

Abrabanel’s final years were spent in Venice, living in Joseph’s home. Although his physical powers were waning fast, his mental capacity was unimpaired, enabling him both to render diplomatic service to the Republic and continue making major spiritual and literary contributions to Judaism.

Shortly after his arrival, again feeling the irrepressible tug of politics, he approached the Venetian Senate with a proposal to mediate in a major commercial dispute between Venice and Portugal concerning the regulation of the Far Eastern spice trade. Abrabanel was conversant with Portuguese affairs, having lived in Portugal for most of his life and mingled in the highest circles. He accordingly offered his diplomatic services to Venice as negotiator with Portugal, now ruled by Manoel I, who, though hostile to the Jews, having ordered their forced conversions in 1497, was friendly towards the Princes of Braganza responsible for the revolt against his deceased

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<sup>225</sup> Idem: *Mif’alot Elohim* (Lemberg, 1863).

predecessor, Joao II. The plan was duly endorsed by the Venetian Council of Ten, Abrabanel's nephew Joseph accordingly being despatched to Portugal to commence negotiations.<sup>226</sup> Despite their ultimate failure, due to extreme Portuguese intransigence, the Senate remained grateful for his devoted services. Abrabanel's exceptionally elevated position in the political arena should be appreciated.<sup>227</sup> He was being entrusted with the conduct of highly delicate negotiations between the two foremost European maritime powers, in a matter concerning international trade.

Abrabanel greatly admired the Venetian governmental system, and became a trusted confidante of and advisor to the Senate. An extract of the Council's memorandum of its initial meeting with Abrabanel, dated 12 August 1503, remains extant, recording his praise for the way Venice ran its affairs, and the Council's appreciation of the value of his proposals.<sup>228</sup> He was now able to resume his interrupted literary activities, writing feverishly, as he instinctively felt time was running out. During his last three years, between 1505 and 1508, he composed commentaries to the remaining four pentateuchal books (Genesis-Numbers), and to Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets. This was a stupendous intellectual feat, comprehensible only on the basis that he had previously formulated many of the basic ideas in his mind, and was now merely committing them to writing.

Though it is inappropriate to discuss Abrabanel's exegesis in detail here, it is noteworthy that, in his exposition of Exodus 18, where Jethro, Moses' father-in-law,

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<sup>226</sup> No record exists of Joseph's conduct of negotiations in Portugal.

<sup>227</sup> Zurita: *Anales de Aragon* 5 (1670)342a, stating that the Venetians 'tried to come to an agreement with the king, Don Manoel, through the mediation of a Jew called Habrauanel' (*sic*), and recording its failure due to Portuguese intransigence, 342f. The spice trade issue is also mentioned by Hesqeto in his brief biography of Abrabanel, appended to his edited version of *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah*, 270.

<sup>228</sup> D. Kaufmann: 'Don Isaac Abravanel et le commerce des épices avec Calicut' in : *Revue des Etudes Juives* 38 (1905) 145f, citing document from Venetian State Archives, 147-148.

proposes the establishment of a sophisticated judicial system for the Israelites, Abrabanel deviates remarkably from the traditional understanding of some crucial phrases. Jethro suggests that Moses should appoint ‘*sarei alafim ve-sarei me’ot sarei hamishim ve-sarei a’sarot*’ to judge the people. This is conventionally interpreted as ‘officials in charge of (groups of) thousands, officials in charge of (groups of) hundreds’, etc.<sup>229</sup> But Abrabanel understands the phrase to mean that there are to be various groups of officials, the first consisting of a thousand members, the second of a hundred, the third of fifty and the last of ten.<sup>230</sup> Evidently, his exposition was influenced by the Venetian constitution, where governmental power was concentrated in the hands of various councils containing differing numbers of members. His relevant observations are worth citing in full:

‘... You should know that each... of these governmental bodies is... found today in... Venice. They have the Consiglio Majore of more than a thousand people. They have another Council called Consiglio dei Pregadi consisting of two hundred people... a Council of Forty called the Quarantis, and one more Council of Ten, called the Consiglio dei Dieci. I have no doubt that this is the true meaning of the titles: rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. It implies public officers belonging to the Council of the Thousand, to the Council of the Hundred, and so forth. The numbers thousand, hundred, etc., refer, then, not to the judged, but to the judges.’<sup>231</sup>

We should further observe here that, whilst conventionally the ‘*sarei alafim*’ are of higher rank than the ‘*sarei me’ot*’ (i.e. the higher the number, the higher the rank of

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<sup>229</sup> See Mekhilta and Rashi to Exodus 18:21.

<sup>230</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus & Leviticus: Commentary to Exodus (Jerusalem, 1964)156-157.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.157.

the relevant official), in Abrabanel's exegesis, the converse is true. Thus, according to him, the '*sarei a'sarot*' (those judicial officers belonging to bodies comprised of ten members) held the most elevated positions. This arrangement corresponded precisely with the Venetian model, thus providing a most dramatic instance of convergence between Abrabanel as statesman and as theologian. This theme, of the influence of the Venetian constitution upon Abrabanel's political thought, as reflected in his biblical exegesis, will be developed in Chapter 4.

Abrabanel himself considered his biblical commentaries his most important and authoritative compositions, declaring that in them he invested all his thought and knowledge.<sup>232</sup> This verdict has been endorsed by posterity, his biblical exegesis now being deemed of far more enduring value than his philosophical/ theological works.

Regrettably, Abrabanel composed no commentaries on the Hagiographa, except for that on Daniel, which had special eschatological significance. The reason for this is unknown, but may have simply been due to lack of time.

Besides the pentateuchal commentaries, he completed his monumental commentary on Maimonides' Guide, in which he clarified the fundamental differences between his own position and that of Maimonides on certain basic issues. He was also engaged, during his final year, in composing his famous 'Questions and Answers to Sha'ul ha-Kohen' (Ashkenazi), in response to twelve philosophical questions addressed to him by this Cretan scholar, who, hearing of his reputation, sought elucidation of certain crucial passages in the Guide. Abrabanel categorically refuted the more radical

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<sup>232</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 86, citing She'elot ha-Rav Sha'ul ha-Kohen (Venice, 1574; rep. Jerusalem, 1967-1968) 8b (pagination: 12).

interpretations then in vogue. His comprehensive replies, replete with personal reflections, constitute a major source of information for his final years in Venice.

Abrabanel wrote to Sha'ul at this time with overwhelming pathos. His words are self-explanatory:

*'I am now advanced in years, my hands are heavy from old age, and the sight of my eyes is not with me; my secretary who was with me in Venice has gone to Palestine. There is no-one to assist me...'<sup>233</sup>*

## 5. Abrabanel's Death - Epilogue

Abrabanel died in Venice, probably in November 1508, at age 71. He could not be buried in the city due to the law prohibiting Jewish interment there, and accordingly, his body was taken to nearby Padua for burial, with the customary honours reserved to dignitaries accorded him by the Venetian Senate. His gravesite has not survived, but he unquestionably left an enduring impression on his co-religionists for his faithful services, as their official spokesman and representative before royalty for several decades, plus an imperishable literary and spiritual legacy. Kapsali called him 'as wise as Daniel' in regard to his political abilities.<sup>234</sup> He received the further accolade, from Sha'ul ha-Kohen, of 'a man of God', in respect of his morals and personality.<sup>235</sup>

Abrabanel's talent as a writer, both in his native Portuguese and in Hebrew, was extraordinary. Though unfortunately addicted to prolixity of expression, his prose

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<sup>233</sup> Saracheck: Abravanel, 56; She'elot 142a.

<sup>234</sup> Kapsali: D'Bei Eliyahu, 71.

<sup>235</sup> She'elot, 4b (pagination: 1).

style is invariably clear and of superb quality, replete with appropriate classical, Scriptural and Talmudic citations and allusions, with a distinctly lyrical flavour.

But perhaps his most striking characteristic, traceable throughout his multifarious activities and permeating all his literary endeavours, is his intense humanity. I advisedly use this word in a dual sense; first, he is remarkably humane – his heart bleeds profusely for his people's sufferings and he devotes all his energies towards alleviating them. But he also emerges as distinctly human, eager to reveal his innermost thoughts and feelings. Unlike many other remote historical figures, one can discern a real personality here, warts and all - intellectually bold, forthright and self-confident, occasionally even somewhat boastful, perhaps overly inclined to pass critical judgment on his illustrious predecessors' works, and demonstrate the superiority of his own views. Yet he is also capable of spiritual introspection, as when profoundly regretting the years wasted pursuing worldly glory, causing him to neglect the study of God's word. Fully conscious of his own significance, he simultaneously desires to harness his energies and employ his talents in the service of others.

The elegy composed by Abrabanel's eldest son Judah on his father's death may serve as a fitting conclusion to this biographical study.

He will live an age eternal,

He will live forever,

His name will shine above all,

As the crown on the royal head.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Saracheck: Abravanel, 59.

## Chapter Two

Abrabanel's Biblical Exegesis: Analysis of Structure, Methodology, Style and Content.

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will attempt to analyse the structure, methodology and aspects of the substantive content of Isaac Abrabanel's biblical exegesis. It will seek (*inter alia*) to determine, from a detailed study of the external features and the substantive content of his commentaries, and comparison, at various points, with the exegesis of other Jewish commentators, both earlier and contemporary, whether he may justifiably be regarded as a traditional, medievalist exegete (as his foremost biographer, Netanyahu, believes), as a humanist Renaissance scholar, or indeed as a mixture of both; and finally, the degree to which his exegesis may legitimately be regarded as *sui generis*.

#### 1.1 The Renaissance Approach to History and Literature

Before examining Abrabanel's commentaries themselves in depth, it is necessary briefly to recall the main features of the Renaissance approach to history and literature outlined in my biographical outline, as his life and career spanned a significant portion of that era.

Abrabanel's biblical commentaries were composed over a period of some forty years during the latter part of the 15th century and the first decade of the 16th, in Portugal, Spain, the Neapolitan Kingdom and the Venetian Republic. These were all places pervaded by the spirit of the European Renaissance, with its primarily humanist culture and values; and it would be surprising if a precocious and intellectually gifted

individual such as Abrabanel, reared within that environment and exposed to its influence, had not imbibed some of its spirit and ways of thinking. In Portugal, for example, travel literature specially flourished, whilst in the Spanish Kingdom of Castile, the early Renaissance was heavily influenced by Italian humanism, commencing with writers and poets.

It is the Renaissance approach to sacred literature that will constitute our primary focus, as being most directly relevant to our theme. A broad description of Renaissance biblical scholarship, which, as will presently be shown, fits Abrabanel very closely, is given by Debora Shuger:

‘Renaissance biblical scholarship is...a disciplinary matrix where philological, historical, legal, antiquarian and rhetorical procedures combine and recombine in response to fluctuations within the larger intellectual culture’

and:-

‘...The Bible remained the primary locus for a good deal of what we might classify as cultural, psychological or anthropological reflection’.<sup>237</sup>

It would be misleading to suggest that such methodology was entirely unknown in the Middle Ages. There had been earlier, ‘literalist’<sup>238</sup> schools of biblical interpretation and contacts between Jewish and Christian exegesis, e.g. Herbert of Bosham, Nicholas de Lyra (who had incorporated a significant portion of rabbinic exegesis,

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<sup>237</sup> Debora K. Shuger: *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, L.A. & London, 1994) 4.

<sup>238</sup> ‘Literalist’ is the term used in this context by contemporary scholars dealing with this period to contrast it with the then conventional allegorical mode of scriptural interpretation. The ‘literalists’ generally tended to interpret biblical events in their historical context.

gleaned from Rashi's biblical commentaries, into his own 'Postilla', composed in Latin for the benefit of Christian scholars) and the school of Hugh of St. Victor, which flourished in the high medieval period. But these were exceptional, and, within the Christian world at any rate, the allegorical and typological interpretational modes preponderated.

Only in the Renaissance era was a new trend in biblical study definitely established. Amongst the early humanist interpreters of the Bible in Spain were the apostate Jew Paul of Burgos, who developed Nicholas's interpretational methods much further, as his knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic writings were far superior, and Jaime Perez de Valencia, whose commentary on Psalms focused mainly on the literal sense and showed knowledge of Jewish exegesis.<sup>239</sup> Christian humanists elsewhere, such as Giles of Viterbo and Johannes Reuchlin, also frequently read Jewish texts, most prominently the Bible and the rabbinic commentaries, in the Hebrew original. These Christians incorporated some aspects of Jewish tradition into their scholarly writings, even when they were incompatible with or even contradicted Christian thought on the same issues.<sup>240</sup>

In a special class of his own was the early 15th century Spanish theologian and biblical exegete Alfonso Tostado de Madrigal, who, in his extensive exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, successfully combined scholastic and humanistic methodology. It is clear from his writings that he was fully conversant both with Hebrew and the classic

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<sup>239</sup> E.F.Tejero & N.F. Marcos: Scriptural Interpretation in Renaissance Spain in:Hebrew Bible: Old Testament II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, ed. M.Saebo (Gottingen, 2008 ) 232.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

rabbinic tradition; indeed, at least according to Gaon, he had an immense influence on Abrabanel, both in the structural methodology of his exegesis and its content.

The most outstanding Jewish representative of the humanist genre was Abrabanel's younger contemporary, Elijah Levita, a linguist and poet cultivating close relationships with Christian Hebraists and biblical scholars.

According to Cohen-Skalli, Abrabanel presented 'a largely positive Jewish scholarly response to Renaissance culture'.<sup>241</sup> I consider this exceedingly brief, yet succinct, statement accurate, and will now attempt to demonstrate how Abrabanel's biblical exegesis incorporated all the aforementioned elements comprising Renaissance culture - the literary and historical, the 'scientific' and the political - whilst yet simultaneously retaining the hard core of time-honoured rabbinic tradition and ideology. Combining the medieval and Renaissance modes of thought in the way he did was no mean intellectual feat, and I contend that the success he achieved in this sphere has earned him a unique place amongst Jewish biblical commentators.

## 2. Abrabanel's Exegesis

### 2.1 Retention of Core Rabbinic Tradition

#### 2.1.1 Background

As those acquainted with rabbinic literature will be aware, scriptural interpretation falls into two main categories, known (in the Talmud) and the traditional commentators respectively as '*P'shat*' and '*D'rash*'. The rabbinic concept of '*P'shat*'

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<sup>241</sup> Cohen-Skalli: 'Paradigm in Isaac Abravanel's Encounter with Renaissance Culture' in: *Hebraic Aspects of the Renaissance: Sources and Encounters*, ed. I. Zinguer, A. Melamed & Z. Shalev (Leiden-Boston, 2011) 54-61. Astonishingly, however, Cohen-Skalli asserts in the final sentence of his article: 'The humanistic revolution took place in the personalities of Jews like Isaac Abravanel, but not in their Hebrew writings'. This assertion appears to contradict his own categorisation (at p.59) of Abrabanel's depiction of King Solomon's wisdom in humanistic terms. See Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 475.

is difficult to define precisely, and its meaning certainly shifted somewhat over the centuries; but it may conveniently be understood (as it most definitely was by Abrabanel's time, and even several centuries earlier) as the contextual, grammatical sense of the biblical word, phrase or passage in question. To my knowledge, nowhere throughout his exegesis does Abrabanel himself define precisely what he means by *P'shat*', though he employs the term extensively. For further assistance in this regard, we may usefully turn to Rashi, writing several centuries earlier, who in his pentateuchal commentary frequently uses the expression '*p'shuto ke-mashma'o*' (its meaning is in accordance with how one would [naturally] understand it'). Interestingly, an authoritative recent Hebrew-English Dictionary renders this phrase as 'its basic (plain) meaning is' / 'it means exactly what it says'<sup>242</sup>, reflecting the usage in current daily parlance, which has doubtless been adopted from Rashi. Significantly also, Rabbi J. Kamenetsky, a major 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox rabbinic authority, states that, in his view, Abrabanel (and Ibn Ezra) cannot be regarded as *halakhic* Decisors because they interpret Scripture '*ke-mashma'uto*', rather than in accordance with traditional Talmudic exegesis.<sup>243</sup> Thus we may safely assert that Abrabanel, by the word '*P'shat*', means the literal or the plain/contextual sense of the biblical text, and this is indeed the way his exegetical predecessors, since Rashi, also used it. This definition will be the one adopted by me throughout this dissertation. '*D'rash*' or 'Midrash', by contrast, represents a homiletical mode of interpretation – an attempt by the rabbis to invest the scriptural text with *universal* relevance. This method is known as hermeneutics. It frequently involves wresting the biblical passage from its historical context, supplementing it with contemporary elements (occasionally resulting in chronological anachronisms), sometimes arbitrarily introducing a '*deus ex*

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<sup>242</sup> R. Alcalay: The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary I (Tel Aviv, 1996) 1536.

<sup>243</sup> J. Kamenetsky: Emet le-Yaakov (N.Y.1998) 283, fn.45.

*machina*' element into narratives, and imbuing the legal ordinances with symbolic significance. Sometimes the Midrash indulges in parables, whilst elsewhere it intersperses its exegesis of a particular text with far-flung allusions to other, ostensibly unconnected portions of Scripture.

These '*aggadic*' elements are incorporated within both Talmuds, and additionally collated in numerous independent literary compositions, the 'Midrashim'.

### 2.1.2 Acceptance of Midrash

The early medieval period had already witnessed a distinct shift away from *midrashic* exegesis in favour of '*P'shat*'. This trend may well have been a reaction to the current Christian mode of exegesis, which was predominantly allegorical in nature, thus lending itself to christological interpretation. Rashi famously claimed that his biblical commentary was primarily concerned with '*P'shat*'.<sup>244</sup> In practice, however, he retained a substantial quantity of Midrash, on occasion even blurring the distinction between the two.<sup>245</sup> Other medieval exegetes, e.g. Joseph Kara, Joseph Bekhor Shor and Rashbam, travelled considerably further along the road towards contextual interpretation.<sup>246</sup> However, it became conventional throughout the next few centuries for biblical exegetes to offer their readers an amalgam of '*P'shat*' and *midrashic* explanations, skilfully interwoven into the fabric of the commentary, without abandoning either interpretational mode entirely.<sup>247</sup> Commentators were thus

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<sup>244</sup> Rashi's Commentary to Genesis 3:8 & 3:22.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, to Genesis 14:13.

<sup>246</sup> Rashbam to Genesis 37:1, ed. Mikra'ot Gedolot (Jerusalem, 1955) 459.

<sup>247</sup> Some commentators, e.g. Nahmanides and R. Bahya, also introduced *kabbalistic* elements.

Abrabanel himself acknowledged the Kabbalah's validity, and quoted, albeit sparingly, from it, e.g. from the Zohar [Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, (Jerusalem, 1964) 88] though disclaiming initiation into its mysteries – ibid. 115.

distinguishable from each other chiefly by the *amount* of emphasis they laid upon each.

Thus, by Abrabanel's time, it would have been virtually unthinkable for a Jewish biblical exegete to dispense altogether with *midrashic* exegesis, which was regarded as an integral part of Jewish tradition, and Abrabanel duly follows suit. The question confronting those preferring to focus upon '*P'shat*' was thus not *whether* to incorporate any Midrash, but *how* to do so – how to demarcate it off clearly from '*P'shat*', to determine the degree of emphasis to be placed upon it, and whether or not to accept it at face value.

### 2.1.3 Predilection for Original, Non- Midrashic Interpretations and Rationalisation of Midrash

By virtue of his humanist, forward-looking cast of mind, Abrabanel decided to create a structure in which the questions or problems arising out of the specific biblical text he was interpreting are based on the contextual meaning of the passage, as are likewise the solutions he proposes. (It is, however, important to note here that Abrabanel's notion of '*P'shat*' frequently involves subtle shifts in the standard meaning of biblical words and phrases, which results in his interpretations differing from the conventional ones, such as, for instance, those of Rashbam.) He rarely introduces a question based entirely upon a Midrash or *aggadic* statement, indeed often forewarning his readers, after formulating his initial questions, that a potential solution based upon what the Talmudic sages have taught “*by way of ‘D'rash’*” is not to be deemed a valid resolution, or that a potential *midrashic* resolution is inconsistent with the contextual meaning of the passage. However, after dealing with the problem

posed by him in terms of ‘*P’shat*’, he frequently takes care to edify the reader with the traditional homiletical interpretation as *additional* fare, simultaneously ensuring, however, that the *midrashic* elements are clearly demarcated from the main thrust of his exegesis.

Abrabanel also evinces a marked tendency to rationalise the Midrash, to super-impose his own sophisticated, or symbolic interpretation upon it, which effectively divests it of its pristine simplicity. He then sometimes tries to integrate such sophisticated allegorical/homiletical interpretations with the strictly contextual ones, with a view to achieving a neat synthesis.<sup>248</sup> This is rational literary conservatism.

#### 2.1.4 Theological Conservatism

Another aspect of Abrabanel’s faithful retention of traditional notions is in relation to *theological* issues. In this area his stance is decidedly conservative, unquestionably accepting Divine Providence, and the full scope of Divine Revelation (extending to both Written and Oral Torahs). He firmly dissents from the earlier rationalist philosophers, such as Maimonides, regarding their symbolic or allegorical interpretations of angelic appearances to humans.<sup>249</sup> For him, unlike for Maimonides,<sup>250</sup> and certainly Gersonides, the Garden of Eden narrative, in Genesis 3, is no myth, but historical reality.<sup>251</sup> However, he too adopts a rationalistic

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<sup>248</sup> E.g. in his discussion of the sin of the builders of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). See Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 177.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. 272-273.

<sup>250</sup> Maimonides: Guide for the Perplexed: (Jerusalem, 1992/3) 237. Maimonides appears deliberately ambiguous about the Garden of Eden narrative, on the one hand apparently accepting the Garden’s physical existence, but on the other, allegorically identifying the serpent with Satan, or the evil inclination, in line with the Midrash.

<sup>251</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 101-102.

interpretation of the serpent's conversation with Eve, as will subsequently be seen.<sup>252</sup> He also takes strong exception to the rationalisation of miracles, such as that of the sun standing still for Joshua, as advocated by exegetes such as Gersonides.<sup>253</sup> He further insists upon a literal interpretation of the resurrection of a dead child by Elijah and Elisha respectively.<sup>254</sup> Again, unlike Maimonides, Gersonides and others, he regards magic and witchcraft as genuine, not illusory, phenomena.<sup>255</sup> Abrabanel accepts the biblical narrative as an accurate historical account of events, except where the Bible itself, expressly or by necessary implication, indicates otherwise. Finally, he holds an entirely traditional view of the binding nature of all the commandments ordained in the Pentateuch as interpreted by the Talmud.

A further, highly conspicuous and important feature of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis is his concern, as regards the Pentateuch, that no superfluous word or phrase should exist in the text. This is because he believes that the entire Pentateuch is of Divine origin, representing God's *ipsissima verba*. Thus it cannot contain anything not absolutely vital for an understanding of the meaning, or repetition purely for stylistic effect. This notion already appears in the Talmud, but is chiefly employed there in relation to the Divine precepts, rather than in regard to narrative passages. Abrabanel extends the concept much further, applying it equally to legal and non-legal material. His attempts to uncover an additional shade of meaning within every ostensibly otiose phrase, plainly demanded much ingenuity, and here his brand of exegesis is manifestly distinguishable from that of earlier commentators. Abrabanel invariably draws attention to apparent textual superfluities in his preliminary questions on the

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Idem: Commentary to Joshua, 51-59.

<sup>254</sup> Idem: Commentary to Kings, 576, 617.

<sup>255</sup> Idem: Commentary to Exodus, 212.

relevant passage, employing his standard phrase ‘*ve-hu kefel me-vo’ar*’ (*‘but this [phrase] is manifestly mere repetition!’*).

A final, and remarkable instance of Abrabanel’s theological conservatism lies in his treatment of the authorship of the last eight verses of the Pentateuch, recounting Moses’ death and burial. The Babylonian Talmud records two opinions: a) that they were composed by Joshua and inserted into the Pentateuch, and b) that Moses wrote these verses too, at Divine dictation, albeit whilst in tears. Abrabanel insists upon the second interpretation, since acceptance of the first would involve an admission that the Pentateuch is not entirely of Divine and Mosaic origin, thus contradicting Maimonides’ Eighth Principle of Faith. Abrabanel’s stance here is particularly revealing, since the more radical notion likewise has Talmudic support, and had indeed been embraced by Ibn Ezra.

Significantly, Abrabanel’s status as a traditionalist commentator is explicitly endorsed by the 19th century pietistic scholar, biblical exegete and Rabbi, Malbim, who, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Jeremiah, describes him as being of ‘those of perfect faith in Israel.’<sup>256</sup>

## 2.2 Renaissance Humanist Influences

Within the constraints of the traditionalist framework described above, Abrabanel allowed himself much leeway, in typical Renaissance style.

### 2.2.1 External Features of Abrabanel’s Exegesis

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<sup>256</sup> Malbim: *Commentary to Prophets and Hagiographa: Introduction to Commentary to Jeremiah* (Jerusalem, 1949) 1.

Let us deal first with the *external* features of his commentaries, including not only the most prominent ones such as their fundamental structure and methodology, but also other, less obvious ones, such as:

- His marked tendency to inject his own *persona*, activities and experiences into the picture, to a degree unknown amongst his exegetical predecessors.
- His frequent digressions from the strict interpretation of the biblical text to introduce tangential observations on such diverse topics as classical and contemporary European history, folklore, human psychology, geography, climatology, anthropology and astronomy, again to a degree previously unknown.
- His psychological observations and interpretations
- His digests and detailed critical and comparative analysis of the views of the foremost earlier commentators.

These four methodological features will all be considered and illustrated in turn,<sup>257</sup> but it is appropriate to focus initially upon his ‘Question-and-Answer’ technique.

#### 2.2.1.1 The ‘Question-and-Answer’ Technique

##### A. Definition

For the purposes of this dissertation, we may conveniently adopt the definition of the classic ‘method of doubts’ adopted by the late medieval scholastics, as formulated by Saperstein.<sup>258</sup> It contains three components:

- The problems are raised at the beginning

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<sup>257</sup> See pp.115-135.

<sup>258</sup> M. Saperstein: ‘The Method of Doubts’ in: *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford, 2003) 139.

- They are designated by the technical term
- They are resolved in the course of a conceptual-exegetical discussion of a series of verses

## B. Origin of the Form

This methodology was not Abrabanel's own invention – it was employed, in a general manner, by the late medieval scholastics. Guttmann, in his work 'Isaak Abravanel', cited by Saperstein, states that the concept of '*sefeqot*' ('doubts') originates in scholastic literature, where constant reference is made to the 'disputed question'.<sup>259</sup> Saperstein himself, however, believes that this is a related but distinct form.<sup>260</sup> In any event, the method had been perfected by Tostado, who is described by A. J. Minnis as 'among those most vocal in professing the importance and primacy of the literal sense', and also referred to as the Spanish 'spiritual descendant of Nicholas de Lyra'.<sup>261</sup> Tostado's system differed somewhat from Abrabanel's, in that whereas Tostado resolved the difficulties listed by him one by one – a question followed instantly by an answer – Abrabanel listed all his questions on a particular passage together at the outset and offered his resolutions within the body of his running commentary, commonly advancing a single idea to serve as the basis for resolution of several problems simultaneously.

Saperstein considers the possible influence of Christian writers upon the structure and methodology and his exegetical contemporaries, but concludes that these do not 'reveal an obvious model for the exegetical...use of the method of doubts that could

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.147, fn.4, citing J. Guttmann: 'Isaak Abravanel', 266.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> A.J.Minnis: 'Material Swords and Literal Lights' in: With Reverence for the Word, 303.

serve as the source for the Jewish writers. The influence of scholasticism on...biblical commentaries of the high and late Middle Ages appears...less than was once assumed'. Gaon would manifestly disagree, believing Tostado to have afforded an extremely close model for Abrabanel (both as to methodology and substance), and undeniably close parallels do exist.<sup>262</sup> Gaon further contends that Tostado was himself influenced by Nicholas de Lyra, who, as noted above, is cited occasionally by Abrabanel too. The fact that Abrabanel never mentions Tostado is no proof that he was unaware of his works, as Abrabanel frequently omits reference to his sources, and never mentions those close in time to his own era.

My overall conclusion on this issue is that, since both Abrabanel and Isaac Arama, (author of 'Aqedat Yizhak')<sup>263</sup> in their different ways, evidently take Christian exegesis into account, and both employ the 'question-and-answer' technique, there was probably *some* measure of Christian influence on the structure and methodology of their exegesis.<sup>264</sup> This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that no Jewish biblical exegete before Abrabanel's time had ever made use of this technique.

### C. Comparison with Other Jewish Commentators

Besides Arama, another of Abrabanel's contemporaries likewise employing this method is R. Isaac Karo (author of 'Toledot Yizhak').<sup>265</sup> But neither of these uses it so extensively and systematically as Abrabanel. Karo only employs this exegetical

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<sup>262</sup> Gaon: The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abravanel (Univ. of London, 1939).

<sup>263</sup> I.Arama: Aqedat Yizhak: abr. Eng. trans. E. Munk (Jerusalem, 1986)

<sup>264</sup> For Abrabanel, see Chapter 5: 'Abrabanel's Stance Towards Christianity'; as for Arama, he expressly declares in the introduction to his pentateuchal commentary that his contemporary co-religionists sought intellectual fare on a par with that offered by the Christian sages in their sermons. Arama accordingly responded to that demand.

<sup>265</sup> I. Karo: Toledot Yizhak (Jerusalem, 1993/94).

device sporadically, and his questions on any particular theme never exceed nine. As for Arama, his modern translator, Munk, claims that his commentary ‘served as a model for other great ‘*Parshanim*’ (exegetes) such as Abrabanel...and others’.<sup>266</sup> Despite some similarities between Arama’s work and Abrabanel’s, such as digressions, and the presentation, and sharp refutation, of potential resolutions offered by earlier commentators to the problems posed by the biblical text, I consider this view mistaken, as Arama’s questions are far more fragmentary, and substantively simpler, than Abrabanel’s.<sup>267</sup> The latter’s are frequently sub-divided into two or more parts, occasionally introducing abstruse philosophical themes. His edifice is constructed with such mathematical precision that no question is ever left unresolved. Equally remarkable is the skill with which Abrabanel interweaves his answers into the fabric of an overall running commentary on the passage in question, often simultaneously dealing with independent issues arising from it. The flow of his writing is continuous.

Saperstein’s view complements mine, in that he states that Abrabanel’s novelty ‘appears to lie in the content of at least some of the questions, the use of a fixed number of questions for each section (i.e. for his commentaries to the Prophets), and the presentation of the questions as an introduction to each exegetical unit’.<sup>268</sup> He too distinguishes between Arama’s format and Abrabanel’s, as Arama’s ‘doubts’ appear in the middle of his discourse, as a transition between its two main sections.<sup>269</sup> Perhaps more fundamentally, Saperstein justly observes that ‘Aqedat Yizhak’ is a

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<sup>266</sup> Arama: *Aqedat Yizhak*, 2.

<sup>267</sup> Munk also gratuitously assumes that Arama’s work was composed first and that Abrabanel had seen the manuscript. This remains to be proved.

<sup>268</sup> Saperstein: *The Method of Doubts*, 134.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

composition ‘straddling the border between a homiletical and an exegetical work’. Abrabanel’s, by contrast, is primarily exegetical.

Besides Arama and Karo, the two most obvious parallels with Abrabanel, Saperstein also discusses some other, lesser-known contemporaries or near-contemporaries, in particular Isaac Canpanton, Joseph Hayyun and Joseph Ibn Shem Tov, who employed this methodology.<sup>270</sup> Canpanton was, however, essentially a Talmudist, and thus cannot be fairly compared with a biblical exegete. The Hayyun parallel is more compelling; he *was* a biblical exegete and Abrabanel’s early teacher. However, as Saperstein himself notes, Hayyun utilises the ‘question-and-answer’ technique only sporadically, though his questions and Abrabanel’s do occasionally share some common features.<sup>271</sup> Ibn Shem Tov was expressly acknowledged by Abrabanel as an early mentor.<sup>272</sup> He too, however, used the technique only occasionally, and for sermons, not biblical commentaries.<sup>273</sup> The other authorities cited by Saperstein belong to a significantly earlier era than Abrabanel’s, and are in any event homiletical or philosophical, not exegetical, in nature.

#### D. Abrabanel’s Recommendation of the Technique and Explanation of his *Midrashic* Selections

It is instructive to examine Abrabanel’s own explanation as to why he chose this particular system of exegesis, and his overriding exegetical objectives. In the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, he writes:<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.137.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 253.

<sup>273</sup> Saperstein: The Method of Doubts, 137-138.

<sup>274</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 13.

**(1)** ‘... I have selected this method, to preface the questions to the interpretation of the verses, as I deem it efficacious to highlight the themes...to initiate discussion and broaden research; and additionally, as highlighting the problems will frequently... increase close analysis of the verses...sometimes I shall adduce some... support for the interpretations (I give to them) from the words of the (earlier) commentators and the paths (trodden by) the Midrashim...Occasionally I shall deviate from these... in accordance with the principle: ‘The good (elements) we shall accept but the bad we shall not! ’<sup>275</sup> ...And... I have, for brevity’s sake, omitted grammatical points... already dealt with by the (earlier) commentators; and have cited those... Midrashim and aphorisms of our Sages... that I deem most beautiful... I shall mention their (respective) sources, unlike Radak...who failed to do so... I shall not refrain from highlighting the weakness inherent in their words in places where (these) were by way of interpretation rather than (transmissive) of traditions received by them... nor will I try you with riddles, like... Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides...nor have I troubled myself to adduce the beneficial (moral and ethical) lessons emerging from the narratives, in the manner of Gersonides...’<sup>276</sup>

In this most revealing passage, Abrabanel describes his methodology. He depicts himself as a proponent of system in biblical interpretation, as one who will not jettison *midrashic* tradition, but will be selective and critical in its use, and as a man of independent mind, prepared to distinguish his approach from that of his illustrious predecessors, upon whose sterling efforts he will nonetheless rely in some measure.

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<sup>275</sup> A phrase lifted from Job 2:10, suitably adapted to Abrabanel’s present purpose.

<sup>276</sup> Abrabanel does often endeavour to derive moral lessons from the biblical narratives, but mainly incidentally, in the course of his general exposition of the text, not by way of summary at its conclusion, as Gersonides invariably does.

These are clearly all the distinctive hallmarks of a ‘Renaissance man’, as delineated by Debora Shuger, cited at the commencement of this chapter.

In his general discussion of this theme, Saperstein cites, but rejects, Baer’s view that the method of raising and resolving doubts was a reaction to the extreme rationalistic tendencies that had undermined the foundations of traditional Jewish belief, i.e. by showing that the problems in the biblical text did have satisfactory solutions.<sup>277</sup> Saperstein’s dismissal of this theory is based on the fact that the ‘*sefeqot*’ raised by the exegetes were chiefly not of a deep philosophical nature. However, in Abrabanel’s case at any rate, numerous questions *are* philosophical, and in his resolutions he often sharply criticises the views of the rationalist thinkers, remarking on the dangers they posed. Hence I consider that Baer’s opinion cannot be lightly dismissed, though admittedly many non-philosophical questions appear too. My conclusion in this regard is that Abrabanel had various objectives in mind when composing his commentaries; some theological, some didactic and others purely exegetical, the last being preponderant.

#### E. Exegetical Divisions

In his pentateuchal commentary, he sub-divides each ‘*Sidra*’<sup>278</sup> into between two and five separate sections (not identical to the traditional chapter divisions – which were in any event a Christian invention), in respect of each of which he poses questions ranging from three<sup>279</sup> to forty-two in number,<sup>280</sup> depending on what he deems the centrality or complexity of the passage.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Saperstein: The Method of Doubts, 144-145.

<sup>278</sup> Viz. the weekly pentateuchal portion rabbinically ordained for synagogal reading.

<sup>279</sup> On Exodus 21-23, dealing with legal ordinances.

However, in his Commentary to the Prophets, although his methodology of division of each biblical book into convenient sections is identical to that employed for the Pentateuch, he invariably raises six questions only. In the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, he explains that he has imposed this numerical limitation to avoid his textual exposition becoming too unwieldy.<sup>282</sup> Logically, he ought to have imposed a similar restriction upon his pentateuchal commentary too; but, although he never says so explicitly, one may reasonably assume that he felt that greater emphasis should be placed upon the Pentateuch, which Judaism regarded as God's direct Word, than upon the rest of Scripture.

#### F. Provenance of Abrabanel's Questions

Finally, it is important to ascertain the exact provenance of the questions. Did they come afresh into Abrabanel's mind at the time he was composing his commentaries, or were they merely a record of his earlier studies and discussions? The only clue Abrabanel provides is contained in his remarks appended to the very end of his Commentaries to Joshua<sup>283</sup> and Judges, the latter of which reads:

*'And this concludes what I have seen fit to explain in relation to the Book of Judges, in accordance with what God placed in my mouth at the time of my study with the colleagues who hearken to my voice...' <sup>284</sup>*

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<sup>280</sup> On Genesis 2-3.

<sup>281</sup> Abrabanel calls his questions '*she'elot*' everywhere except in his Commentary to Deuteronomy, and the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, where he uses the term '*sefekot*' (doubts). The reason for the difference in terminology is unclear, though, notably, the Christian scholastics also employed the expression 'doubts'.

<sup>282</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 13.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.91.

<sup>284</sup> Idem: Commentary to Judges, 161.

Behind these rhetorical phrases, Abrabanel is here informing us that the questions posed in his commentaries are a record of the issues arising from his biblical lectures given to a group of his close companions, which he had then discussed with them. Although Abrabanel's remark seems only to apply to his commentary to Judges, it is probably equally applicable to the remainder of his biblical exegesis, as he expressly declares that his students urged him to commit his lectures on the Former Prophets to writing.<sup>285</sup> If this view is accepted, it becomes far easier to understand how Abrabanel, intelligent as he was, could have completed such a vast volume of material within the exceedingly brief timespans he himself records for its composition.<sup>286</sup> He had evidently made notes for his numerous lectures, which were to provide the basis for his subsequent reduction of these into permanent written form.

#### 2.2.1.2 Abrabanel's 'Introductions'

Another prominent feature of Abrabanel's exegesis is his elaborate Introductions to many of the biblical books on which he comments, discussing their authorship, date of composition and purpose. Even with the Pentateuch, whose Divine origin constitutes a Judaic doctrine, he still seriously queries whether Deuteronomy records the words of God or of Moses, though ultimately he affirms the traditional doctrine.<sup>287</sup> The concept of introductions to biblical commentaries was not invented by him, but his are far more voluminous and varied in material than those of all his exegetical predecessors. The impression is sometimes given by contemporary scholars that Abrabanel borrowed the very idea of Introductions to Scripture from the medieval Christian

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<sup>285</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 3.

<sup>286</sup> At the conclusion of his commentary to virtually every book on which he comments, he records the respective Hebrew dates of commencement and completion.

<sup>287</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Deuteronomy, 4-7.

scholastics.<sup>288</sup> This, I maintain, is a totally unnecessary hypothesis. Virtually all Abrabanel's Jewish exegetical predecessors had composed Introductions, not only to their pentateuchal commentaries but also to other biblical books.<sup>289</sup> It is true that such Introductions are also a typical feature of medieval Christian scholasticism, further highly developed during the Renaissance era. The early 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish biblical exegete Pedro Beuter, for example, in his 'Annotationes decem in Sacrum Scriptorum' made the order of the Books in the Church and the Synagogue, authorship of the various books and chronology the chief focus of his attention.<sup>290</sup> Lawee specifically notes a parallel in this connection between Abrabanel's and Tostado's respective Introductions to Joshua.<sup>291</sup> However, the evidence suggests that the notion of Introductions was a parallel, convergent development amongst Jews and Christians. Abrabanel's innovation in this regard lay in their elaborate, critical and generally non-homiletical content, and it is this feature he probably borrowed from the late medieval scholastics.

I now revert to the four methodological features aforementioned.<sup>292</sup> I have treated these, for present purposes, as methodological, in contradistinction to substantive, i.e. where Abrabanel expounds the meaning of the text.

#### 2.2.2.1 Abrabanel's 'Personalisation'

One of the most striking features of Abrabanel's commentaries is the way he brings himself, and his own experiences and activities into the picture. This is in marked

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<sup>288</sup> E.g. Ruiz. See Introduction (literature Review).

<sup>289</sup> E.g. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, R. Bahya, Ba'al ha-Turim.

<sup>290</sup> Tejero & Marcos: Scriptural Interpretation in Renaissance Spain, 234.

<sup>291</sup> Lawee: 'Introducing Scripture' in: With Reverence for the Word, 166-167.

<sup>292</sup> See p.106.

contrast to virtually all of his exegetical predecessors, whose work is decidedly impersonal. In the Introductions to his commentaries to Deuteronomy,<sup>293</sup> Joshua<sup>294</sup> and Kings,<sup>295</sup> the major and most dramatic events and turning-points in his career are recounted and their ramifications carefully analysed. Moreover, even within the main body of the commentaries, he mentions extraneous literature he has read,<sup>296</sup> academic research he has conducted,<sup>297</sup> and dialogues he has had with third parties (e.g. Christian theologians) which he considers have a bearing upon his exegesis.<sup>298</sup> Perceptive readers will doubtless also note the frequency with which the first person is used in his commentaries. Abrabanel is plainly no spiritual recluse, but a man pulsating with life, and imbued with intellectual curiosity, possessing a strong sense of his own significance and of the impact of his activities upon his environment. Such again are the distinctive hallmarks of the typical Renaissance-man, including humanist biblical exegetes, as appropriately delineated by Debora Shuger above.<sup>299</sup>

#### 2.2.2.2 The Digressions

Whether or not other Renaissance-era writers, religious or secular, customarily digressed from their main themes to expatiate upon tangential topics is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What interests us here is the nature of Abrabanel's digressions and their purpose.

##### A. Nature of Digressions

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<sup>293</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Deuteronomy, 3.

<sup>294</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2-3.

<sup>295</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Kings, 422-423.

<sup>296</sup> E.g. Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Pliny, Josephus/Josippon, Jerome, Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Bede, Aquinas, Paul of Burgos, John de Mandeville.

<sup>297</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 218.

<sup>298</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 221.

<sup>299</sup> See p.97 & fn.237.

These may conveniently be classified under numerous different categories; historical, geographical, climatological, astronomical, political, philosophical, linguistic and anecdotal. Although the subject-matter varies widely, their underlying purpose seems to have been both to capture his readers' interest and illustrate the biblical narrative's contemporary relevance. It should be noted here, for the avoidance of doubt, that, although the Renaissance scholars tried to establish the meaning of the biblical text in its ancient context, this did not necessarily preclude them from also seeking contemporary relevance. Tostado, despite his inclination towards literal interpretation, did not neglect the spiritual and metaphoric meanings of Scripture.<sup>300</sup>

Two contemporary Spanish theologians have observed:

'The Spanish humanists lived in their time and were not insensitive to such important events as the discovery of America. Given that Scripture was an inspired text, that all truths could be found there and that God was the architect of the world, it was natural that the New World had to be integrated therein in one form or another.'<sup>301</sup>

Thus the Spanish humanist Luis de Leon, about a century after Tostado, following rabbinic views, identified '*Sefarad*' in Obadiah 1:20 with Spain. Peru was identified with the '*Parva'im*' in II Chronicles 3:6, and Yucatan with the '*Yoktan*' of Genesis 10:26.<sup>302</sup> Abrabanel's extensive acquaintance with all these wide-ranging topics was fairly common amongst the more distinguished of his intellectual Christian

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<sup>300</sup> Tejero & Marcos: Scriptural Interpretation in Renaissance Spain, 232.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.241.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

contemporaries. It may safely be said that no other traditional Jewish biblical exegete, before or since, has cast his net so widely.

Spatial considerations preclude an exhaustive treatment of the digressions, but it will be helpful to adduce one or more examples within most of the above categories.

#### B. Examples of Digressions.

- Historical Events and Anecdotes.

One interesting example of Abrabanel's incorporation of a famous historical event into his commentaries occurs in his exegesis of the episode concerning King David and Bathsheba in II Samuel 11. He is berating David, as a king, for having committed adultery with his servant's wife, thus precipitating his ruin, an offence exacerbated by the fact that that servant (Uriah) was then engaged in David's service, fighting his battles. Abrabanel states:

*'Have you not heard what occurred in Spain in the days of King Don Rodrigo, who committed adultery with the Chieftain Julian's daughter... (as a result of which Julian) brought over (to Spain) all the Ishmaelites dwelling overseas; and they...conquered the whole of Spain to exact vengeance upon that king who had lain with his daughter...'<sup>303</sup>*

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<sup>303</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 342. The earliest Arabic sources dealing with the Muslim conquest of Spain date from the latter half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The best-known account is that of Ibn Abd al-Hakim, in which Count Julian, Governor of Ceuta, seeks revenge on Roderic (last king of the Visigoths) for raping or seducing his daughter. Julian offers Tariq ibn Zayid ships to cross the Straits of Gibraltar and invade Spain. Tariq's forces head for Cordova, killing on their way. Roderic engages them in battle, but he and his entire army are slain. The (Mozarabic) Chronicle of 754, a Christian source, is silent concerning Roderic's alleged immoral conduct, stating merely that the Arab governor of N.Africa despatched an invading force under Tariq in 711. See Constable, O.R., ed. Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources (Philadelphia, 1997) 33. According to another contemporary scholar, Fuentes, it is true that Count Julian joined in a

Abrabanel utilises this quasi-historical event, occurring centuries before his time, to illustrate his point that it is imprudent, even for an ostensibly all-powerful ruler, to abuse his loyal servants, since retribution is likely to be exacted sooner or later.

Another dramatic digression occurs in Abrabanel's exegesis of Exodus 23:19, containing the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Abrabanel observes:

(2) '*... the most probable (reason) for this is that it was (part) of the idolators' rituals at the time of their assemblies – to boil the kid's milk at harvest-time, believing that they would thereby appease their god...and that he would bestow a blessing on their handiwork...and, a fortiori, that shepherds habitually did this at the time when they assembled to follow their customs and usages. To this day, this is the custom in the Spanish Kingdoms; all the shepherds assemble twice annually to take counsel and make enactments in matters concerning the shepherds and the flocks –... they call that assembly 'mesta' in their language; and, we have ascertained, this is their food – meat and milk (together)... I have already enquired and know for certain that similarly, in the island at the earth's extremity, called England, where there are more sheep than in all other countries, this is also their perpetual custom...*'<sup>304</sup>

Abrabanel dramatically enlarges upon Maimonides' view that this ostensibly strange prohibition was ordained to wean the Israelites away from contemporary idolatrous

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rebellion against Roderic and called in what he believed to be a mercenary troop of North African Berbers under Tariq's command. However, the rape/seduction of Julian's daughter is mere legend, originating in the gossip-mongering world of the Visigoths, and this appears to be the general historical consensus. Thus Abrabanel has evidently accepted the legend at face value. See C. Fuentes: *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (N.Y. 1999) 51.

<sup>304</sup> Idem: *Commentary to Exodus*, 217-218.

rites, by drawing attention to the continued existence of the identical practice in Spain and England, thus investing it with historical authenticity.<sup>305</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the way Abrabanel emphasises the extensive investigations he has made to ascertain the precise facts about the '*mesta*' ceremonies, not only in Spain but also in faraway England. The Spanish '*mesta*' was a most important economic institution for some six centuries,<sup>306</sup> and it is also indisputable that England, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, was a predominantly wool-producing economy. Abrabanel's intellectual curiosity and interest in local customs is probably attributable in large measure to Renaissance influences, though occasional instances of this phenomenon already existed in the High Medieval period, e.g. the Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela, and, in the Gentile world, Marco Polo.

Abrabanel relates a further intriguing event in his Commentary to Exodus 7, when discussing the second of the ten plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians. Abrabanel insists that the conventional identification of the creatures responsible for the plague, referred to in the text as '*tzefarde'im*', with frogs, is incorrect, and that they were actually crocodiles. After adducing various textual proofs to support his view, he proceeds:

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<sup>305</sup> Maimonides: Guide, 392.

<sup>306</sup> See C.R. Phillips and W.D. Phillips: Spain's Golden Fleece (Baltimore, 1997); J.Klein: The Mesta: A Study in Spanish Economic History 1273-1856 (Cambridge [Mass.], 1920), for a description of the different institutional mechanisms at the heart of its operations. In Velazquez @ Spanish and English Dictionary, the Mesta is defined (by way of secondary definition) as 'the annual meeting of shepherds and owners of flocks, which bears the title of 'El honrado concejo de la Mesta' (the Honourable Board of Mesta'. This definition, be it noted, ostensibly contradicts Abrabanel's description, insofar as he states that the shepherds' assembly took place bi-annually. However, Klein, in his specialised study of the Mesta, states (p49) that from about 1500 the number of Mesta assemblies each year was reduced from three to two, and that it was only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that they were further reduced to one. As Abrabanel composed his commentary to Exodus between 1503 and 1508, his information was up-to-date, the Velazquez dictionary definition reflecting the position during the later period. Despite extensive research, I have been unable to uncover corroborative evidence of the Mesta members' culinary habits at their assemblies, though Klein does mention, suggestively, that these often took place in the open fields.

(3) ... ‘And... to this day, they occasionally emerge from the River Nile to the shore to catch human and animal prey; and at the time of the plague, they multiplied enormously and emerged by Divine decree...and tore to pieces the domestic animals... found nearby...

... ‘... Nowadays, there is... an island inhabited by Spaniards from the Portuguese Kingdom, locally called “Crocodile Island”,<sup>307</sup> as they (the crocodiles) emerge there from the sea, and enter the island to seize prey to eat, and the island’s inhabitants battle against them with sword and spear....hammers and axes;... they used to devour most of the islanders’ children; but now, after a long while, they have driven them away with their stratagems and weapons, (preventing them) from ascending onto the island; but they (still) ascend from the sea onto the adjacent shore. The King of Portugal compelled many of the Jewish children from amongst the Spanish exiles to convert to his religion, and dispatched them there fourteen years ago – all... children without blemish, male and female, over 2000 souls;... they have already... multiplied there, and most of the island is inhabited by them;... this island is located slightly away from the equator...’<sup>308</sup>

Notably, this episode is also referred to, with slight variations, by Samuel Usque, a Portuguese Jewish refugee subsequently living in Italy, who wrote for the cultural classes of the Renaissance.<sup>309</sup> Garfield, the island’s modern historian, likewise

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<sup>307</sup> The island is the former Portuguese Atlantic colony of Sao Tome, which, according to J.D. Fage, became the principal base for trade on the Niger-Cameroons coast from about 1493. See J.D. Fage: An Atlas of African History (Bungay, 1958) 27.

<sup>308</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 67.

<sup>309</sup> S. Usque: Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel: Eng. trans. M.A. Cohen (JPS, Philadelphia,

generally confirms the episode, albeit from a notably detached viewpoint, citing as his major historical source J. L.de Azevedo,<sup>310</sup> adding that Azevedo is not sympathetic to the Jews' plight. Garfield complements abrabanel's succinct account, confirming that the Portuguese king's real motive was his (and his Court's) concern for the nation's religious purity, and that the children (from age 2 to 10) were baptised and instructed in the Christian faith. However, he adds various factors tending to minimise the king's cruelty, e.g. that he wished to provide an immediate younger generation to colonise the island, that the children were allocated families to live together with them, that they were not physically mistreated (according to Portuguese accounts) and that they eventually became some of the wealthiest and most powerful men on the island. He further cites Valentim Fernandez's 'Descricaõ' (composed some time after 1510) for the number of Jewish children dispatched to Sao Tome (i.e. 2000), of whom only 600 are said to have survived. Fernandez's figure corresponds to abrabanel's, though Garfield himself considers it exaggerated. Finally, Garfield says nothing about crocodiles, but does state (p2) that 'one effect of (Sao Tome's) climate is the extreme degree of unhealthiness prevailing on the island in former times...the greatest menace being malaria, and (p18) that the original settlement (by one Caminho) was located adjacent to a huge swamp – this of course being ideal territory for crocodiles to breed and proliferate.

Yet another interesting historical aspect of Abrabanel's commentaries is the frequency of his references to Josephus (or, more precisely, to its abridged medieval Hebrew

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1965) 200-202.

<sup>310</sup> Jose Lucio de Azevedo: *Historia dos Cristaos Novos Portugueses*, Lisbon; Livraria Classica, 1921, 21.

version known as Josippon/Joseph b. Gurion).<sup>311</sup> He generally invokes Josephus in support of historical facts or views he has himself advanced. Several of his exegetical predecessors had also cited Josippon, but not as often as Abrabanel.

- Geographical and Climatological Observations
    - a. Geography
- In his commentary to Genesis 10, Abrabanel seizes the opportunity to trace the origins of numerous contemporary nations to their biblical roots (showing their respective descent from Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's three sons), and informs us of their respective locations. He mentions (*inter alia*) Armenia, Mauritania, Cilicia, Rhodes, Turkey, France, Brittany, Italy, Britain, Germany, Syria, Libya, Ethiopia, Persia, and Palestine. Whilst some of his identifications contradict current anthropological views, others are fairly accurate. Significant, however, is the very fact of Abrabanel choosing, within the context of a biblical commentary, to elaborate upon such matters, illustrating his modernistic mindset and broad cultural interests.

Again, in his commentary to Genesis 2,<sup>312</sup> & 3,<sup>313</sup> and Exodus 7,<sup>314</sup> he refers to the equator; in Genesis 3, he cites a commonly accepted view that the Garden of Eden was located there, and that it is a region of intolerable heat, but dissents on the grounds that in his day, Portuguese sailors had travelled far beyond it into the southern hemisphere and discovered fertile land with flourishing civilisations there. In his exegesis of Exodus 7, he mentions that the Portuguese have rounded the (Atlantic) Ocean to reach Ethiopia.

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<sup>311</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 130 *et al.*

<sup>312</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>314</sup> Idem: Commentary to Exodus, 16.

In his commentary to Genesis 2:10-14, Abrabanel cites the view of ‘the Gentile Sages’,<sup>315</sup> identifying the four rivers there mentioned, Pishon, Gihon, Hidekel and P’rat, respectively with the Ganges, the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates, adding, correctly, that the Nile is the world’s longest river.<sup>316</sup> He appears to endorse their view as to the identity of the Pishon against that of Rashi, who identifies it with the Nile.<sup>317</sup>

Moreover, in his commentary to I Kings 10, he expatiates upon the modern locations of places there referred to, such as Ophir and Tarshish, in the course of which he mentions the cities of Tunis and Carthage.<sup>318</sup>

Finally, displaying typical Renaissance interest in global travel and exploration, Abrabanel refers, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Ezekiel, not only the renowned 12th century Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela, but also, surprisingly, the 14th century English knight John de Mandeville, whose account of his Middle Eastern peregrinations he claims to have read.<sup>319</sup>

#### b. Climatology

In his exposition of Deuteronomy 31:10-13, he explains that one reason for the ‘*Hakhol*’ ceremony (a septennial assemblage of the entire Israelite nation to hear the words of the Torah) taking place during the Feast of Tabernacles rather than on

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<sup>315</sup> He frequently refers to them as such on numerous topics.

<sup>316</sup> His identification of the Pishon with the Ganges, in India, is problematical, since the other three rivers mentioned alongside it are all located in the Middle East, where the Pentateuch originated. However, it does illustrate the range of Abrabanel’s geographical horizons.

<sup>317</sup> See Rashi to Genesis 2:11.

<sup>318</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 543.

<sup>319</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Ezekiel, 431-432. The work is actually fictional, composed by a French author, but was universally regarded as authentic until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Passover is that the weather is more temperate at the autumnal than at the vernal equinox, since at springtime the winter chills are still prevalent and the river waters still icy. Accordingly, a benign Divine Providence ordained that the people should travel to and from Jerusalem during a more clement season.<sup>320</sup> Such an interpretation is entirely novel, and typical of Abrabanel, a lateral, imaginative thinker willing to draw upon all areas and sources of knowledge to enable his readers to gain a profounder appreciation of Scripture.<sup>321</sup> His climatological observation is indeed scientifically correct and borne out by experience.

- Astronomy

Probably the most comprehensive instance of Abrabanel's display of his astronomical knowledge is his extensive excursus on calendrical calculation appended to his commentary to Exodus 12:1, to which reference is made in a later chapter, entitled 'Abrabanel and the Karaites'.<sup>322</sup>

However, he fully endorses the conventional geocentric Ptolemaic cosmology of his day. He died over thirty years before Copernicus revolutionised astronomy by demonstrating that the earth orbits the sun, and can hardly be blamed, therefore, for maintaining the contrary, in common with Aristotle and most of the Greek philosophers.

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<sup>320</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 291.

<sup>321</sup> I consider his observation about the contrast between the air and water temperatures in spring and autumn respectively a digression, as this information is really unnecessary for the exposition of the text. The conventional explanation for the septennial '*hakkel*' ceremony taking place on Tabernacles rather than at any other season is that Tabernacles celebrated the ingathering of the harvest, which was a time of abundant national rejoicing ; hence the Israelites were enjoined to spend the entire festival week in Jerusalem, whereas on Passover, by contrast, they were permitted to return home on the morning immediately following the Paschal offerings (i.e. on 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> Nisan) – see Deut. 16:7.

<sup>322</sup> Idem: Commentary to Exodus, 88-96.

- Political Reflections

Numerous observations are made throughout Abrabanel's biblical commentaries regarding different types of political constitutions, past and present, mutually comparing and contrasting them. These will subsequently be discussed in detail in my specialised study of this topic. Suffice it to say here merely that Abrabanel is opposed generally to monarchy, both absolute and constitutional, and favours republics (in practice oligarchies, such as contemporary Venice or Florence); for Jewry, he anticipates a theocracy. As I shall subsequently demonstrate in the thematic chapter on Abrabanel's stance towards monarchy, his political views were influenced not only by the Bible but by his own personal experiences and, to a minor degree, by the relevant writings of his Christian humanist contemporaries. His notions of ideal judicial systems are based on the Bible, interpreted largely in light of his direct acquaintance with that of Venice, where he lived from 1503 until his death in 1508.<sup>323</sup>

### Philosophy

Abrabanel's philosophical ideas are chiefly concentrated within his exegesis of genesis 1-3, on Creation and the origin of good and evil,<sup>324</sup> of Genesis 41, on the nature and significance of dreams,<sup>325</sup> of Exodus 25, on the symbolism of the Tabernacle and its appurtenances,<sup>326</sup> of Exodus 33 & 34, on Divine Providence,<sup>327</sup> and of Deuteronomy 18, on the nature of prophecy.<sup>328</sup> All these philosophical disquisitions are sufficiently elaborate, dense and complex as to render them incapable of neat summarisation, and are of interest primarily to students of Jewish philosophy. It is in

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.156-157, commenting on Exodus 18: 21-26.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.3-122.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.379-390.

<sup>326</sup> Idem: Commentary to Exodus, 243-254.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. 323-348.

<sup>328</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 175-184.

this area, that, I believe, Abrabanel harks back to medieval scholasticism, albeit, naturally, within a Jewish setting. Basically, he is attempting to combat the Aristotelian super rationalism characteristic of some of the earlier eminent Jewish philosophers.

#### 2.2.2.3 Psychological Observations and Interpretations

This area has, to my knowledge, never been academically explored to date. Abrabanel, though sincerely believing in the Divine element in human affairs, also acknowledges a human element. His exegesis, time and again, seeks to explore and uncover the motivations of the various biblical characters as revealed by their actions. One interesting instance of this occurs in his exposition of Genesis 19, where he queries why Lot, confronted by a mob of Sodomites assembled outside his home demanding the instant surrender to them of his two guests, attempts to save them by voluntarily offering them his own two daughters instead!<sup>329</sup> In the course of his question, he notes that the *midrashic* Sages indeed condemned Lot for this. However, he replies as follows:

... ‘... *One must say that he (Lot) said this to them (at a time) when Lot’s sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, were (outside ,intermingled) amongst the men of the city, as he knew that they would not agree to this (proposition) and would save their wives from that (act of) lewdness, and that the other inhabitants...would not, on account of their husbands, do such a shameful thing to them in their sight, so that by*

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<sup>329</sup> Idem: Commentary to Genesis, 232.

*this means the matter would be dragged out and hence the (guests) would be saved...<sup>330</sup>*

Here Abrabanel is illustrating the strategic importance of *delaying tactics* in human relations. He appears perfectly content to deviate from the *midrashic* approach, which takes Lot's conduct at face value and condemns him for it outright. It seems incongruous to Abrabanel that a man so concerned for others' welfare as to be willing to risk his own life for them should simultaneously be prepared to sacrifice his flesh and blood to the fury of the mob. Hence he advances a psychological explanation both inherently plausible and consistent with the thread of the narrative. Moreover, Abrabanel's premise, that Lot's sons-in-law were outside the house at the time in question, is supported by the subsequent verse, Genesis 19:14: 'And Lot went outside, and spoke to his sons-in-law...' For Abrabanel, textual support for his ideas is essential.

Another fascinating psychological interpretation occurs in connection with the narrative in Genesis 42, dealing with Joseph and his brothers in Egypt. Immediately they appear before him, he accuses them of being spies, and when they inform him that they have another brother back in Canaan, he tells them (42:16): 'Send one of you to fetch your brother, and (meanwhile) you shall be incarcerated...' The Hebrew phrase for 'send one of you' is '*shil'hu mi-kem ehad*'. The conventional understanding of these words is that whilst one brother goes to fetch Benjamin, the others must remain in Egypt as hostages to ensure the emissary's return with him. But Abrabanel is dissatisfied with this on both psychological and grammatical grounds.

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.248.

He points out that, even if one brother alone is sent, he might well succeed in persuading the innocent Benjamin to fabricate a false story like the rest of the brothers. Abrabanel also notes that the grammatical sequence of the words of the above phrase is strange. If the standard interpretation were correct, one would expect to find '*shil'hu ehad mi-kem*'. Abrabanel now advances his alternative interpretation:

... *'Nor shall one of you go to fetch him, lest he entice him to speak falsehoods, but send an (independent) man of your own volition and choice, and let him go to fetch that brother of yours, whilst you (all) remain incarcerated...'.*<sup>331</sup>

An independent person, unrelated to the brothers, would have no motive for persuading Benjamin to lie. Again we see how closely Abrabanel penetrates into the motives governing the actions of the biblical characters; and simultaneously, how concerned he is that his interpretation should fit the actual words of the text. These examples illustrate a subtle and imaginative mind at work.

#### 2.2.2.4 Digests and Critique of his Predecessors' Exegesis

##### 2.2.2.4A General

Living in the late medieval era, Abrabanel was fortunately able to draw upon the writings of numerous other major Jewish, and Christian, biblical exegetes. Whilst evidently inspired by the ideas of his Jewish predecessors, to whom he owed much, and intrigued by those of the Christian scholars, one cannot but be struck by his fiercely critical approach towards them. He constantly analyses their views, mutually comparing and contrasting them, declaring his preference for one school of thought

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid. 402-403

over another, or else dismissing them all as unsatisfactory, as being inconsistent with the contextual meaning of Scripture, and then positing his own view as the final word.<sup>332</sup> Ready to confer praise where he considers it due, he can also be harsh towards uncongenial ideas, sometimes accusing their proponents of heresy or of reducing Scripture to mere philosophical symbolism, without respect for the literal word.<sup>333</sup> He was evidently deeply worried about the rampant assimilation within Iberian Jewry, and their neglect of the Divine precepts, for which he held the super-rationalism of the classic Jewish philosophers to blame, and which, he believed, had triggered Divine punishment in the form of the Expulsion.<sup>334</sup> He declares, perhaps somewhat bombastically, that he '*has been most zealous for the honour of the Lord of Hosts, in order to remove a stumbling-block from the path of (the) people*'.<sup>335</sup> However, he cannot *generally* be regarded as intolerant. He was content to cite alternative views to his own in non-theological matters, where he felt they had some merit, in a detached manner, often concluding with the remark: '*and each individual's path is right in his own eyes*' (i.e. equally legitimate).<sup>336</sup> Furthermore, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, he is even favourable towards sober Christian biblical exegesis not involving christological interpretations.<sup>337</sup>

#### 2.2.2.4B Stance towards Earlier Jewish Exegetes

The six major Jewish exegetes regularly mentioned and analysed by Abrabanel are:- Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nahmanides, Gersonides and Nissim Gerondi

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<sup>332</sup> See e.g. Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 182, supporting Nahmanides against Rashi. Numerous similar instances exist.

<sup>333</sup> E.g. ibid.116, 122.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.104, where he compares the philosophers' sin to Eve's.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.122. Characteristically, he employs rhetorical phrases here, from 1Kings 19:14 and Isaiah 57:1.

<sup>336</sup> E.g. ibid. 184 (discussing Maimonides' and Gerondi's conflicting views) and 208 (examining conflicting approaches of Maimonides and Nahmanides).

<sup>337</sup> See Chapter 5.

(‘Ran’).<sup>338</sup> Besides these, he also occasionally refers to Saadia Gaon, Judah ha-Levi (author of the ‘Kuzari’), David Kimhi (‘Radak’) and his father Joseph, Joseph Ibn Caspi, and the philosophers Abraham bar Hiyya, Albalag, Joseph Albo and Hasdai Crescas. Of the six major authorities, he is perhaps most critical of Gersonides, whose extreme rationalist stance towards miracles, and to the origins of the universe, he dislikes. He deeply admires Maimonides, to whom he refers as ‘*the great Master*,’<sup>339</sup> but does not refrain from criticising him too, despite his universal fame, when he feels he has taken rationalism too far.<sup>340</sup> In one instance, he even declares:

*‘What will the Master (author) of the Guide respond when he will have to stand in judgment before the Master of the Universe? Who permitted him to allegorise part of the Creation narrative... or did he (perhaps really) intend to allegorise it entirely?’*<sup>341</sup>

Abrabanel’s attitude towards Rashi is highly respectful, though, one feels, somewhat distant; he never engages with Rashi to the same degree as with Maimonides or Nahmanides. In the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, he expresses deep regret that Rashi, notwithstanding his greatness, was mostly content to limit himself to *midrashic* exegesis.<sup>342</sup> He occasionally endorses Rashi’s views,<sup>343</sup> but equally has no hesitation in dissenting from them.<sup>344</sup> In a particularly revealing observation,

<sup>338</sup> Maimonides did not actually compose a biblical commentary, but discussed numerous theological issues arising out of the biblical text in his Guide, on which Abrabanel himself lectured and composed a commentary.

<sup>339</sup> E.g. Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 137 & 139, where he declares that Nahmanides merited criticism by Gerondi, having himself criticised Maimonides!

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.310.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>342</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 13.

<sup>343</sup> Idem: Commentary to Genesis, 192 *et al.*

<sup>344</sup> E.g. ibid. 200, where he daringly criticises Rashi for ‘*not feeling the truth of the matter as appropriate*’.

Abrabanel, characteristically, refers to Rashi in one and the same breath as '*the father and master of the entire Talmud*', but as having nonetheless erred in the citation of a specific Talmudic passage.<sup>345</sup> Clearly, by virtue of his upbringing, he felt a greater affinity to the Sephardic commentators, who tended to view the Bible in a holistic manner, than to the Ashkenazic, whose horizons were narrower and focused primarily on *aggadic* and *halakhic* elements.<sup>346</sup>

Abrabanel's stance towards Ibn Ezra is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he acknowledges Ibn Ezra as a sound grammarian and an advocate of '*P'shat*'-mode exegesis, not servile to the Midrash; but on the other, considers him too terse and laconic to be of much use to the average student and further accuses him of superficiality.<sup>347</sup> He also suspects him of cloaking his rationalism in the guise of ostensibly straightforward literal interpretation.<sup>348</sup>

Nahmanides was one of the foremost rabbinic authorities, and probably the greatest Talmudist ever produced by Iberian Jewry. His pentateuchal commentary was almost instantly considered a classic, combining, as it did, '*P'shat*', '*D'rash*' and *Kabbalah*, and adopting a respectful, yet also critical attitude towards his predecessors Rashi and Ibn Ezra. By Abrabanel's time, his fame both as Talmudist and biblicalist was legendary. Abrabanel was thus exceedingly bold to adopt the critical stance towards Nahmanides' views that he did. Although sometimes bestowing accolades of praise upon him, referring to him as '*the great Master*', he is just as often dismissive of his

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<sup>345</sup> Idem: Commentary to Samuel, 297-298.

<sup>346</sup> Rashi is indeed the sole Ashkenazi exegete cited by Abrabanel.

<sup>347</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 13. Notably, Abrabanel here taunts Ibn Ezra for frequently composing a commentary on a biblical passage briefer than the text itself!

<sup>348</sup> Idem: Commentary to Genesis, 85.

interpretations, though he is invariably careful to offer reasons for his stance.<sup>349</sup> An interesting case in point is Abrabanel's rejection of Nahmanides' famous censure of Sarah's harsh treatment of her rebellious maidservant Hagar, recorded in Genesis 16:6, on the philosophical ground, citing Aristotle's Ethics, that where unacceptable conduct is severe and deep-rooted, extreme corrective measures are called for to restore the balance.<sup>350</sup> It is typical of Abrabanel's linguistic subtlety that, occasionally, when disapproving of one of Nahmanides' opinions, he refers to him somewhat condescendingly, as '*ha-Rav ha-Nahmeni*' ('the Nahmanite rabbi').<sup>351</sup>

Abrabanel's treatment of Gerondi, author of the moralistic commentary on the Pentateuch entitled 'D'rashot ha-Ran', is generally favourable. Gerondi was a sophisticated and original thinker, albeit of the theologically conservative type, and thus appealed to Abrabanel, who refers to him as '*ha-Rav he-Hasid Rabbenu Nissim*' ('the pious Rabbi, our Teacher Nissim').<sup>352</sup> Yet he too was not spared the occasional lambasting by Abrabanel; in one particular case, after citing at length his interpretation of the idea of the Creation within six days, he somewhat sarcastically dismisses it with the words:

*'But for all its adornment, beauty and philosophising, it is incorrect and untrue in my eyes.'*<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> E.g. *ibid.*51, where he asserts that Nahmanides' question as to why God did not expressly mandate the creation of non-fruit-bearing trees *has no validity whatsoever*.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.* 217.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*182.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*74.

Elsewhere, having cited Gerondi's interpretation of a particular incident, he triumphantly concludes:

*'But what I have written is more correct!'*<sup>354</sup>

Apparently no other traditional exegete, before or since Abrabanel, has been so informative about his predecessors' views, or subjected them to such critical analysis.<sup>355</sup> This is one of the most strikingly unique features of Abrabanel's commentaries, and is manifestly a reflection of the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, which refused to bow automatically to ancient authority. It is also a reflection of Abrabanel's own character; evidently possessing a keen awareness of his own abilities and scholarship, he is nonetheless genuinely concerned with establishing historical and spiritual truth.

### 2.3 Compositional Style

A survey of the external features of Abrabanel's commentaries would be incomplete without at least some discussion of his written style. Though lucid and easily comprehensible, it has been heavily criticised for its prolixity.<sup>356</sup> It is believed to be the most elaborate of all extant traditional Jewish commentaries on the Pentateuch and the Prophets. One contributory factor is undoubtedly Abrabanel's frequent habit of citing biblical verses in full and then paraphrasing them, leaving nothing to the imagination. Another factor is his predilection for florid rhetoric (*melitzah*) –a typical

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid.258.

<sup>355</sup> R.Simon: Book III, ch. VI (London, 1682) 34-35, Eng. trans. Here, in discussing Abrabanel's exposition of other rabbis' views, Simon describes him as 'speaking his opinion very freely'. (See also Chapter 8 below.)

<sup>356</sup> Ibid. ch. VI, 34-35.

Renaissance literary feature. Doubtless, judged by modern standards, the criticism of prolixity is valid, but Abrabanel might himself have advanced two specific justifications in defence. First, he felt a religious obligation to his readers to leave no ambiguities or unresolved issues in the understanding of Holy Writ, as he declares:

*'Where elaboration is necessary, it is not permitted to abridge!'*<sup>357</sup>

His sincerity in this connection is indicated by his remark at the end of his Commentary to Jeremiah that, since he has already covered the topic of the destruction of the Temple in his Commentary to Kings, '*there is no benefit in repeating the (same) words!*'<sup>358</sup> Second, his repetitive tendency was probably due to his habitual oral lecturing on the same material, where such style is natural. It certainly makes for clarity, and the scope of the material he covers is undeniably impressive.

We now turn our focus to the substantive content of Abrabanel's exegesis, as opposed to its structure and methodology. His interpretations of the biblical verses *per se* will here be explored, ignoring all excursi and tangential observations. There will, however, unavoidably remain a slight measure of overlap between these two elements, due to the diffuse and eclectic nature of his exegesis.

### 3. Substantive Content of Abrabanel's Exegesis

#### 3.1 Distinctive Features

##### 3.1.1 Creative and Lateral Thinking

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<sup>357</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 13.

<sup>358</sup> Idem: Commentary to Jeremiah, 431.

On perusing Abrabanel's biblical commentaries, one is struck by the novelty and ingenuity of some of his ideas, which appear to be entirely *sui generis* – a product neither of *midrashic* influences nor of conventional grammatical and syntactical interpretation. 'Abrabanel felt free to question the Rabbis on their use of Midrash, voicing his opinion that they were not omniscient in all things.'<sup>359</sup> Abrabanel might himself have regarded them as being legitimately within the realm of '*P'shat*', as they are plainly neither *midrashic* nor *kabbalistic*. However, they are not the kind of interpretations or ideas that would occur naturally to one perusing the biblical text in a casual manner. They frequently involve a shift in the conventional understanding of key words and phrases. Some of Abrabanel's interpretations received the enthusiastic endorsement of later Christian and Jewish scholars, whilst others were viewed by biblical critics, such as Richard Simon, as 'too subtle'.<sup>360</sup> But they were too dramatic to be ignored.

While spatial considerations preclude a comprehensive analysis of these '*sui generis*' interpretations, a few selected examples will be provided, to gain an appreciation of their distinctive features.

The examples adduced below fall into three categories. The first involves cases where Abrabanel advances a totally fresh, nay revolutionary, interpretation of an entire biblical narrative, conflicting with established notions. The second involves novel interpretations of specific words and phrases found in the scriptural text. The third

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<sup>359</sup> S.D.Benin: 'The Search for Truth in Sacred Scripture: Jews, Christians and the Authority to Interpret' in: With Reverence for the Word, 22-23, citing Saperstein: Decoding the Rabbis, 8-12.

<sup>360</sup> Simon: III ch.VI, 34-35. See also Chapter 8 below.

contains instances of Abrabanel's 'revisionist' biblical chronology and textual biblical criticism. All these will now be examined.

### 3.1.1.1 Novel Interpretations of Biblical Narratives

- Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Here Abrabanel steers a unique middle course between the rationalists, like Saadia, Maimonides and Gersonides, on the one hand, who regard the entire narrative of Eve's enticement by the serpent as allegorical, and understood the serpent as a symbol for the Satan (Saadia),<sup>361</sup> the evil impulse innate within human beings (Maimonides),<sup>362</sup> or the imaginative faculty (Gersonides);<sup>363</sup> and the literalists, e.g. Rashi, and Ibn Ezra (ostensibly),<sup>364</sup> who accept the story at face value. Critical of both approaches, he accepts that all the *dramatis personae* in the narrative are real, but then suggests that the serpent did not actually speak, as this would contravene natural laws. He postulates that the serpent, which obviously possessed no power of reason, instinctively slithered up the Tree of Knowledge to consume the fruit growing from its branches. Eve, observing this, saw that it did not perish but remained completely unharmed, and concluded that, contrary to God's apparent warning to Adam, eating the fruit of the tree would not cause death. Emboldened by this, she ate herself and offered some fruit to Adam.<sup>365</sup>

In this interpretation, we see a rationalist, albeit somewhat conservative, mind at work. Abrabanel, knowing that animals cannot speak, is unwilling to stretch credulity

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<sup>361</sup> Ibn Ezra, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook I (Jerusalem, 1977) 25 - to Genesis 3:1, citing Saadia.

<sup>362</sup> Maimonides: Guide, 237.

<sup>363</sup> Gersonides: Commentary to the Pentateuch, I, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1992) 62.

<sup>364</sup> Ibn Ezra to Genesis 3:1.

<sup>365</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 101.

to breaking-point. He justifies his deviation from the literal interpretation of the text by observing that here, unlike in the Balaam narrative, where it is explicitly stated that God opened the donkey's mouth,<sup>366</sup> no such statement appears in regard to the serpent.<sup>367</sup> Yet he simultaneously appreciates that to allegorise the entire narrative would ultimately deprive it of all didactic meaning. He is likewise all too aware of the inimical results of the super-rationalist approach of Maimonides and others, having directly witnessed how the Iberian Jewish intellectuals employed allegory to justify their outright neglect of the Divine precepts. Abrabanel's exegesis of this important episode is unique and characteristic.

- The Sin of the Builders of the Tower of Babel

Here Abrabanel takes issue with all his exegetical predecessors, including the Midrash, and concludes that the permanent dispersion of those who constructed the city and its Tower was due to their deliberate abandonment of their former, simple agricultural life-style, which would have left them free to focus upon the spiritual dimension, and their deliberate choice to replace it by sophisticated urban life, this being contrary to the Divine will.<sup>368</sup> He dismisses both the *midrashic* interpretation that they were punished for wishing to dethrone God, on the grounds of its intrinsic improbability, and Ibn Ezra's and Gersonides' view that the dispersion and confusion of tongues was no punishment, but simply reflected God's plan that, in the course of time, the entire world should be populated rather than concentrated in one region.<sup>369</sup> Abrabanel feels that neither of these notions accords with the biblical text. His interpretation, effectively embracing the notion of the ideal primal state of nature, is

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<sup>366</sup> Numbers 22:28.

<sup>367</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 101.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.175-177.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.175-176.

entirely novel, and somewhat surprising, considering that he was himself urban-based throughout his life.

- The Binding of Isaac
- Here Abrabanel dramatically breaks with traditional exegesis, maintaining that, contrary to the conventional rabbinic view<sup>370</sup> and that of all the earlier commentators<sup>371</sup> (save the maverick Ibn Ezra),<sup>372</sup> Isaac was unaware until he was actually bound upon the altar and Abraham unsheathed his knife to slaughter him, that *he* was the designated sacrificial victim.<sup>373</sup> With this theory, Abrabanel explains why, both throughout the Bible and subsequent, rabbinic literature, credit for this deed is invariably accorded to Abraham, never to Isaac. The only apparent obstacle to his thesis is the enigmatic dialogue between Abraham and Isaac on their way to Mt. Moriah, when Abraham, responding to Isaac's enquiry 'Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?' ambiguously declares: 'God will provide the lamb for the burnt-offering, my son!'<sup>374</sup> Abrabanel explains this simply to mean that Isaac need not worry about this, Isaac thereby being led to believe that God merely desired his symbolic submission, to be manifested by laying himself on the altar. Instinctively sensing, however, that his radical departure from the conventional interpretation - that by these words Abraham was effectively informing Isaac that he was to be sacrificed - requires support from traditional

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<sup>370</sup> Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (Jerusalem, 2005) 260; Targum Yerushalmi to Genesis 22:8, ed. Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Oz ve-Hadar'I (N.Y.& Israel, 2009) 689.

<sup>371</sup> E.g. Rashi and Radak to Genesis 22:8.

<sup>372</sup> Ibn Ezra maintains that Isaac had no wish to be sacrificed, and Abraham had to bind him to the altar to prevent him fleeing.

<sup>373</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 270-272.

<sup>374</sup> Genesis 22:7-8.

sources, he ingeniously invokes the refrain of the Penitential Prayer ('*Selihah*') instituted by the early Gaonic authorities, based in turn on *mishnaic* sources: 'He who answered Isaac, his (Abraham's) son, when he was bound upon the altar, may He answer us!'<sup>375</sup>

Abrabanel argues that, according to the traditional view, Isaac would not have prayed for his salvation whilst on the altar, as he had readily consented to be sacrificed; this prayer makes sense only if Isaac had not previously anticipated being slaughtered, and that it was the sudden shock of ultimately realising the bitter truth on seeing Abraham's knife descending to pierce his throat that drew from him his desperate *cri-de-coeur* to be spared.

The fact that Abrabanel is willing to re-interpret so radically an episode which he himself acknowledges as central to Judaism demonstrates conclusively that he does not consider himself bound by ancient rabbinic tradition where reason and the biblical text itself, understood in context, contradict it.

During my researches into earlier commentators' exegesis, I discovered that Abrabanel's view on the *Akedah* episode is actually advanced, in simpler form, by Gerondi in his recently discovered, incomplete commentary to the Pentateuch (to be distinguished from his better-known '*D'rashot*').<sup>376</sup> Hence it is not entirely original. I decided, nonetheless, to include it among Abrabanel's novel interpretations because of his appeal to an obscure strand of rabbinic tradition, as reflected in the '*Selihot*', in

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<sup>375</sup> A. Rosenfeld: Authorised Selichot for the Whole Year (London, 1957) 37.

<sup>376</sup> R. Nissim b. Reuben Gerondi: Commentary on the Bible, ed. L. Feldman (New Jersey, 1968) 86.

support of his thesis, and also because Abrabanel was conceivably unaware of this commentary, in contrast to the '*D'rashot*', to which he regularly refers.

- King David, Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite (II Samuel 11& 12)

Abrabanel's radical interpretation of this episode has earned him the severe censure of several later commentators, including Malbim.<sup>377</sup> Here he contradicts the mainstream rabbinic view that, notwithstanding the plain sense of the biblical narrative, David was not really guilty of adultery with Bathsheba or Uriah's murder, since, in common with all other soldiers going forth to battle, he had previously issued a bill of divorce to his wife, and moreover, merited death as a rebel against royal authority.<sup>378</sup> Abrabanel maintains that he finds no textual evidence supporting either contention.<sup>379</sup> He insists that Uriah was a loyal servant of the king, who conducted himself shamefully. He indeed condemns David on five separate counts.<sup>380</sup> However, recognising how far he has strayed from tradition in this matter, and acknowledging the centrality of David within Judaism, he astutely seizes upon the statement in the Babylonian Talmud by the 3rd century sage, Rav, that 'Rabbi [Judah the Prince], being himself descended from David, deliberately twists the meaning of the biblical narrative in his favour'.<sup>381</sup> This is another typical instance of Abrabanel wishing to prove that support may be adduced for his radical ideas from the rabbinic sources themselves. It is, however, quite remarkable that Abrabanel adopts such a critical stance towards David, notwithstanding the fact that he boasted direct Davidic familial

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<sup>377</sup> Malbim: Commentary to Former Prophets: Commentary to Samuel (Jerusalem, 1973) 98-99.

<sup>378</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 56a.

<sup>379</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 341-344.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.342.

<sup>381</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 56a.

descent. Significantly, no other medieval exegete, not even Ibn Ezra, dared to adopt such a bold stance as Abrabanel on this issue.

### 3.1.1.2 Subtle Shifts in Meanings of Words and Phrases

Throughout his exegesis, Abrabanel displays a thorough mastery of the nuances of the Hebrew language. He makes use of such nuances, within the sphere of '*P'shat*', to advance many intriguing textual interpretations which, albeit certainly unconventional, are capable of fitting the grammatical and syntactical sense of the text.<sup>382</sup> To illustrate this tendency, three selected instances should suffice.

- In Genesis 31:24, God exhorts Laban, in a dream: '*Hi'shamer le'kha pen te'daber'im ya'akov mi-tov 'ad ra'*'. The conventional rendering of this command is 'Take heed that you speak not to Jacob either good or evil!' Abrabanel's problem with this is that whilst it is understandable that Laban, Jacob's erstwhile employer and oppressor, should be restrained from threatening him, it is hard to see why he should be prevented from speaking kindly to him. Abrabanel accordingly shifts the normal meaning of the phrase '*mi-tov ad ra*', and chooses to interpret it in its literal sense, '*from good to evil*'. He proceeds to explain that, when people quarrel verbally, they sometimes begin with harsh words and allegations but later, having vented their harsh feelings, endeavour to conclude on a pacific note. On other occasions, however, the reverse sequence occurs. Thus God is warning Laban that if he is determined to speak to Jacob, he should ensure that he does not start with kind words, only then to launch into a bitter tirade against him (i.e. proceeding *from good to evil*), since the spirit of hatred will leave an indelible

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<sup>382</sup> As will be seen below, however, he occasionally overplays his hand in this sphere.

mark on both parties. Laban should rather vent his spleen at the outset, and then conclude in conciliatory fashion, on the basis of ‘All’s well that ends well!’

Here Abrabanel fulfils two objectives: he obviates the logical difficulty with a psychological explanation, whilst simultaneously retaining and emphasising the literal meaning of the original Hebrew words. For some, like Richard Simon, Abrabanel may be over-subtle, but he is consistent with and faithful to his own exegetical methodology.

- A similar example occurs later in the same narrative, where Jacob and Laban finally make a mutual pact never to harm one another. Laban duly invites Jacob to swear ‘by the *God* of Abraham and the *gods* of Nahor’, their respective ancestors, to observe the pact, but Jacob ‘swears by “*pahad avi*’v *yizhak*” - the *fear* of his father Isaac’.<sup>383</sup> The conventional understanding of the phrase ‘the fear of his father Isaac’ is ‘the One whom his father Isaac feared’ i.e. the Almighty. But Abrabanel perceives a problem with this rendering, for Jacob would then be placing the Almighty on a par with the heathen deities worshipped by Nahor. Hence he re-interprets the phrase to mean that he swore by the most fearful event in Isaac’s life i.e. the Akedah. (This interpretation fits perfectly with Abrabanel’s exegesis of that episode, discussed above.)<sup>384</sup> Jacob’s recollection of this most solemn and pivotal moment in his father’s life would inspire him to keep his oath. By this subtle shift in the meaning of the genitive ‘the fear of Isaac’, Abrabanel ingeniously succeeds in resolving his theological difficulty.

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<sup>383</sup> Genesis 3:52 & 53.

<sup>384</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 333, 334.

- A final instance of creative verbal subtlety is provided by Abrabanel's striking interpretation of Genesis 37:2, where Joseph, at seventeen, is described as follows: '*hayah ro'eh et e'hav ba-tzon*'.<sup>385</sup> This is conventionally rendered: '(Joseph) was tending the flock with his brothers', the key word 'et' being understood as an ablative. But Abrabanel contends that 'et' here is really an accusative, thus interpreting the phrase: (Joseph, though just 17) was (already) guiding his brothers (in all matters) regarding the flock'. Not only has he subtly altered the meaning of the particle 'et', but also that of 'ro'eh'. However, this latter change too is grammatically legitimate, as Abrabanel cites in support a similar usage in the verse '*Ro'eh yisra'el ha'azinah*' ('O Shepherd of Israel, hearken' (Ps.80:2) The advantage Abrabanel gains by these verbal shifts in meaning is that he is thereby able to provide a further psychologically plausible reason for the jealousy of Joseph's brothers.

Abrabanel's exegesis contains numerous further similar instances, but the above three suffice to provide a distinctive flavour. There are certainly cases where Abrabanel stretches grammatical and/or syntactical convention beyond acceptable bounds, but these are at least counterbalanced by the ones of positive type.

### 3.2 Textual Criticism

It is fairly well-known to Abrabanel scholars that, in the Introductions to his respective Commentaries to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he criticises their general Hebrew style, and even their grammar and syntax, contrasting these with the purity of Isaiah's

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid.363.

language.<sup>386</sup> Once again, although Abrabanel still upholds the prophetic status of these two seers, his views on their lack of perfection in externals suffices to arouse the ire of the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator Malbim, who may conveniently be regarded as the yardstick by which to measure ‘modern’ Jewish orthodoxy. Similarly in this connection, Lawee cites the criticism of Abrabanel by S. Z. Hanau, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish grammarian.<sup>387</sup> Abrabanel’s extraordinarily bold approach in regard to the sacred text is fully in the spirit of contemporary Christian humanists. In similar vein is Abrabanel’s claim, in his Commentary to I Kings 10:22, that Ezra the Scribe, who, according to him, authored the Book of Chronicles, misunderstood the true intent of the author of Kings, on whom he relied for his factual information, in relation to the phrase ‘ships of Tarshish’.<sup>388</sup> Ezra too, like David, is a crucial and hallowed figure in Judaism, and to accuse him of error in composition of sacred Scripture could easily be construed as a general challenge to the inspired authority of the entire Bible. This instance reveals Abrabanel as a forerunner (albeit to a limited degree) of modern biblical Higher Criticism, and again, Lawee notes that he was chided by Samuel Laniado, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Syrian exegete, for imputing error to Ezra.<sup>389</sup>

Only slightly less serious, though also problematic from a traditionalist perspective, is Abrabanel’s view that it is clear from internal textual evidence within the Book of Joshua that he could not have been the author of that Book.<sup>390</sup> This, as Abrabanel himself acknowledges, directly contradicts the Talmudic view that Joshua authored

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<sup>386</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Jeremiah, 297-300; Introduction to Commentary to Ezekiel, 434.

<sup>387</sup> Lawee: ‘From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship’ in: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, ed. M. Saebo (Gottingen, 2008) 213.

<sup>388</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 543-544.

<sup>389</sup> Lawee: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship, 213.

<sup>390</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 7-8.

the entire Book, barring the last few verses recording his death.<sup>391</sup> Abrabanel adduces proof from the various occasions where we are informed that something established by Joshua is still in existence ‘unto this day’, implying that the author is writing long after Joshua’s death.<sup>392</sup> He maintains that this Book was actually composed by Samuel.<sup>393</sup> Yet again, aware that he has invited criticism on this score, he argues subtly that, since the Talmudic sages were internally divided as to the authorship of various other biblical books, the issue of authorship cannot be considered a doctrinal one, and thus he too is entitled to his own view.<sup>394</sup> It is also highly significant in this regard that, although the identical phrase ‘unto this day’ also appears in the Pentateuch,<sup>395</sup> Abrabanel avoids taking his reasoning to its logical conclusion by maintaining that the Pentateuch is likewise of post-Mosaic origin. For whilst the Divine dictation of the Pentateuch constitutes a *doctrine* of traditional Judaism,<sup>396</sup> the authorship of the rest of Scripture does not.

### 3.3 Radical Views on Biblical Chronology

The most authoritative and comprehensive rabbinic source for biblical chronology, besides the Bible itself, was universally accepted to be the ‘Seder Olam’, traditionally attributed to the second century R. Yose b. Halafta. Its chronology was adopted not only by the Babylonian Talmud, but also by all traditional exegetes preceding Abrabanel.

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<sup>391</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Bava Batra 14b, 15a.

<sup>392</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 7.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.8.

<sup>395</sup> E.g. Deuteronomy 10:8.

<sup>396</sup> See Maimonides: Eighth Principle of Faith: J.H. Hertz: Authorised Daily Prayer Book (London, 1959) 253.

Abrabanel, however, expends much energy challenging Seder Olam's chronology on several important issues.<sup>397</sup> His starting point is the strange verse in I Samuel (13:1), which, rendered literally as it stands, translates as 'Saul was one year old when he began his reign, and ruled for two years over Israel'. Evidently the received *masoretic* text is corrupt, and Saul's actual age on ascending the throne has been omitted. It is also virtually impossible that all the events of his turbulent reign could have been compressed into a mere two years. Another problematic assertion is Seder Olam's assertion that the prophet Samuel died aged 52,<sup>398</sup> for, as Abrabanel observes, Samuel describes himself as 'old and grey-haired', suggesting an age of around 75.<sup>399</sup> One further point of contention for Abrabanel is Seder Olam's computation of the total length of the era of the Judges.<sup>400</sup> Here, although the Bible itself provides the length of each individual judge's rule, it is unclear whether or not this is in addition to the intervening periods of oppression of the Israelites by various neighbouring hostile nations, or partly contemporaneous with them. Abrabanel demonstrates Seder Olam's inconsistency on this point. Moreover, he questions its seemingly arbitrary computation of the number of years elapsing between Joshua's death and the commencement of the first judge's rule.

Within the constraints of the explicit statement in I Kings 6:1 that 480 years elapsed between the Exodus and the fourth year of Solomon's reign, Abrabanel constructs his own alternative chronology, which he deems closer to the evidence of the biblical text itself. As Strauss has perceptively remarked, Abrabanel is essentially a biblicalist rather

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<sup>397</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 230-234.

<sup>398</sup> Seder Olam Rabbah (1897, rep.with Introduction by S.K.Mirsky 1966) ch.12.

<sup>399</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 234.

<sup>400</sup> Seder Olam, ch.12.

than a traditionalist, i.e. where the two approaches apparently conflict.<sup>401</sup> Abrabanel's approach in this regard was revolutionary, unparalleled by any other Jewish exegete until the far more radical Azariah dei Rossi (author of *Me'or Enayim*) almost a century later.

Yet, notwithstanding, Abrabanel staunchly defends the traditional rabbinic chronology as to the length of the Second Temple period, and, in particular, of the era of Persian domination.<sup>402</sup> He is fully aware that the Gentile historians, and Josephus, had allotted a far longer time-span to the Persian era than the meagre fifty-two years allowed by the rabbis, of which thirty-four post-dated completion of the building of the Second Temple. Abrabanel does not challenge *Seder Olam* here because the biblical evidence, gleaned from Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, allows for only four or five Persian sovereigns, rather than the ten whose reigns are acknowledged by Gentile historians. Abrabanel is thus manifestly constrained by the Bible itself; his radical views are accordingly restricted to *rabbinic* interpretations of biblical verses and what he deems unwarranted traditionalist assumptions, unsupported by solid textual evidence.

Lawee pertinently observes that Abrabanel's predilection for chronological issues in the Bible was a key component of the Renaissance 'sense of the past'.<sup>403</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

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<sup>401</sup> See p.225.

<sup>402</sup> Abrabanel: *Commentary to Hagiographa: Commentary to Daniel ('Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshuah')* (Jerusalem, 1960) 383-385.

<sup>403</sup> Lawee: *From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship*, 211.

Having now completed the survey of the structure, methodology and content of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis, certain definite conclusions may be drawn. Abrabanel is primarily, though not exclusively, an exponent of '*P'shat*'-type exegesis. However, this is not simply confined to explication of grammar and original historical context. He views Scripture in a *holistic* manner, bringing to bear a vast store of learning, drawn from many different disciplines, history, geography, astronomy, philosophy, politics and linguistics, to clarify, amplify and adorn his interpretations. These *excursi*, being neither allegorical nor mystical in nature, accordingly fall outside the realms of Midrash and Kabbalah. They are included partly for their own intrinsic interest, and partly for the purpose of illustrating the Bible's ongoing contemporary relevance. The breadth of Abrabanel's canvas far exceeds that of any other medieval Jewish commentator. In this regard, his exegesis is essentially *sui generis*.

Attention has already been drawn to Abrabanel's creative interpretations, in which he subtly shifts the conventional understanding of particular words and phrases, or gives them a novel twist, which is generally still consistent with biblical Hebrew grammar and syntax. Various examples have been given above of this *genre* of interpretation, which is both a typical feature of Abrabanel's exegesis and unique to him. The question arises whether such interpretations may be legitimately regarded as within the realm of '*P'shat*'. In one sense they can, being manifestly neither *midrashic* or *kabbalistic* in character. However, to include them within the category of '*P'shat*' would involve broadening the standard conception of this term substantially. On balance, therefore, it is probably safest to conclude that Abrabanel has effectively created a *sui generis* mode of interpretation, though it is certainly arguable that his type of exegesis constitutes a radical extension of the '*P'shat*' mode. Doubtless

Abrabanel himself, if pressed on the point, would have considered the latter as a more accurate description. I would contend, however, that it was the very *flexibility* of the humanist approach to scriptural exegesis that gave Abrabanel the impetus to forge ahead with his own brand.

Whilst his exegesis is homiletical only to a limited degree, Abrabanel does seek opportunities to adopt a hermeneutical approach, to derive moral and ethical lessons from Scripture, though these tend to be on an occasional, incidental basis rather than a systematic one. In regard to Midrash, with which he is evidently thoroughly conversant, he tends to interpret particular Midrashim so as to accord, as far as possible, with his own generally rationalistic interpretations of the biblical passages upon which the Midrash is based.

A marked dichotomy exists between Abrabanel's exegesis in regard to *theological and doctrinal issues*, where his stance is markedly conservative, perceiving himself as battling for preservation of Jewish faith and tradition, and that in respect of *linguistic and historical matters*, where he is exceptionally liberal by the standards of his day. On several important subjects, e.g. those excerpted above, his stance is radical. I believe the explanation for this dichotomy lies within Abrabanel himself. In the strictly personal sphere, and on account of his early education, intellectual mindset and cultural milieu, he fully appreciated the fresh intellectual currents of the Renaissance, in which he desired wholeheartedly to participate, yet simultaneously felt, as an authentic Jew, and particularly as an eminent communal leader, that the faith and tradition must be preserved. He resolved this major dichotomy by absorbing, and imparting, as much of the new learning as he believed could safely be used to

enhance traditional Judaism, whilst emphatically rejecting the rest. Thus his writings as a whole, not just his exegetical works, reflect the mindset of a man seeking above all to maintain his, and his people's distinctive identity, in a rapidly changing world.

One may thus legitimately wonder why Abrabanel persistently incorporates Christian scriptural exegesis into his commentaries, occasionally even endorsing it. Surely, after the experience of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492, the Portuguese forced conversions of 1497 and the horrors of the Inquisition, Christianity should have been the enemy *par excellence*!<sup>404</sup> The clue to this ostensibly incomprehensible phenomenon arguably lies within the recesses of Abrabanel's own personality. He was sufficiently broad-minded to be willing to distinguish between Christian theology, which he repudiated uncompromisingly, and the ideas of Christians on non-doctrinal themes, offering interesting alternative modes of interpretation to those of the Jewish commentators. We have already mentioned in this connection the importance of Nicholas de Lyra's Postilla, and undoubtedly his emphasis on the literal sense and concomitant reliance on rabbinic exegesis must have rendered his biblical commentary of such interest to Abrabanel. Indeed, Abrabanel's disdain for the Jewish philosophers' super-rationalism even led him to acknowledge, more than once, his preference for the simple faith of the Christian exegetes, who adhered to the literal meaning of the biblical text, over the extreme allegorising tendencies of some of his own eminent co-religionists. Thus, for the sake of authentic belief and intellectual

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<sup>404</sup> Francois Soyer's recent study of the forced conversions of Portuguese Jewry is important insofar as he reconstructs the different stages of coercion commencing from Manoel I's promulgation of his expulsion edict in December 1496 leading up to the forced conversion of all Jews around Easter 1497. These stages included the seizure of Jewish communal property, the confiscation and burning of Hebrew books and the abduction and conversion of all Jewish children. Soyer also highlights Manoel's ultimate preference for forced conversion over expulsion. See F. Soyer: The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manoel I and the end of Religious Tolerance (1496-1497) (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 194, 198, 206-209, 226, 239.

truth, Abrabanel was ready to set aside his own personal resentment of the Christians for their treatment of his people. This phenomenon is unparalleled by any of the other commentators whose works I have studied generally or during my present research.

It must also be appreciated that, throughout Western Europe at the time, Christianity was the only existing rival ‘philosophy’ to Judaism, and was still monolithic. Moreover, deism, pantheism and atheism were almost unknown. It is thus hardly surprising that Abrabanel felt it imperative to engage seriously with Christian theology, with which he was so familiar. The urgency of his task was increased by his awareness that, in the wake of the Expulsion, countless Jews had already apostasised to save their lives and possessions, and that the temptation to convert remained immense. Moreover, as Klepper notes, Jews and rabbinic texts had, since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, been subjected to increasing attack in Western Christendom, with ever-increasing polemic deriding Jewish scriptural interpretation.<sup>405</sup> For example, Paul of Burgos’s critique of the Postilla, appended as ‘Additions’ thereto in many early printed editions, constituted a systematic challenge to de Lyra’s use of Jewish exegesis. Such polemic had to be effectively countered to save Sephardic Judaism from total disintegration.

Abrabanel’s purely philosophical *excursi* are extremely elaborate and dense, and thus perhaps somewhat unattractive to the average modern reader. They are generally anti-Aristotelian in character. Yet, for all his anti-rationalistic strictures, he nonetheless felt that major Jewish theological concepts, such as the nature of creation, revelation and Divine providence, required full adumbration, and fulfilled this task with his usual

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<sup>405</sup> Klepper, D: ‘Literal Versus Carnal: George of Siena’s Christian Reading of Jewish Exegesis’ in: Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange, ed. N Dohrman and D Stern (2008), 201-202.

thoroughness. He is, however, arguably at his most stimulating when expatiating on historical, geographical and political themes, and indulging in anecdotal lore.

The external structure of his commentaries, the two central features of which are his ‘question-and-answer’ technique, and his elaborate General Introductions appended to many of the biblical books, in which he discusses their authorship, date of composition and fundamental purpose, is highly systematic. Here Abrabanel follows in the footsteps of the late medieval Christian scholastics and humanist Renaissance biblical scholars, to whom he is somewhat indebted in this regard. The questions formulated by him, arising directly from the text itself, reflect his discussions with his students in numerous prior lectures. Furthermore, his summaries, and critical analyses, of the views of his exegetical predecessors, with comparisons to his own, are virtually unique in pre-modern Jewish biblical exegesis, again reflecting the humanist spirit. These have considerable value, since even if one rejects Abrabanel’s own interpretations, one is instantly able to compare and contrast the respective exegetical approaches of other major commentators, presented in digested, yet accurate form. The only other exegete employing a similar methodology is Arama, albeit to a far lesser degree.

Abrabanel’s exegesis includes numerous *psychological insights*. He frequently interprets the actions and motivations of biblical characters in light of his own personal experiences and/or inherent understanding of human nature. This distinctly *humanistic* element in Abrabanel’s commentaries is far more prominent than in the works of other exegetes.

His exegesis also contains an emphatic *personalised* element. There is an unmistakeable focus, permeating his commentaries, upon what *he* thinks and feels about a whole range of issues. Again, I know of no other commentator in whom this subjective tendency is so marked - in this respect he is truly *sui generis*, though his boldness of approach owes much to humanist influence.

It has also been demonstrated that Abrabanel's biblical exegesis can effectively be described as an amalgam of the five 'Humanities' – poetry, grammar, history, ethics and rhetoric – normally regarded as the defining characteristics of Renaissance humanism.<sup>406</sup> Abrabanel was not a poet, but his Introductions are frequently composed in sustained rhymed verse, in the '*melitzah*' rhetorical style, which he has perfected to a fine art.

In light of the above, it is impossible to share Netanyahu's view that Abrabanel is essentially a medievalist in outlook, or a mystic. Netanyahu's assertion that Abrabanel's 'reasoning was never free... in any real sense, but controlled and restricted by religious dogma' is misleading. Naturally, Abrabanel was constrained by religious dogma, but no more so than his Christian exegetical contemporaries. Moreover, the mere fact that Abrabanel acknowledged the Kabbalah's authenticity as an integral part of Jewish tradition, which included the notion of reincarnation,<sup>407</sup> does not make him personally a mystic. He indeed explicitly admits that he was not initiated into the Kabbalah's mysteries.<sup>408</sup> His assertion '*God spoke to man in a*

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<sup>406</sup> Art. 'Humanism' in: *The Renaissance: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, ed. L. Rachum (London & Jerusalem, 1979) 245.

<sup>407</sup> Abrabanel: *Commentary to Deuteronomy*, 235. (Abrabanel's Christian contemporary, Marsilio Ficino, likewise espoused reincarnation, yet is considered an authentic Renaissance humanist.)

<sup>408</sup> See pp.57-58.

*language understandable to all men*<sup>409</sup> is also significant. In any event, as several humanist scholars were ‘Christian kabbalists’, e.g. Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin and Paracelsus,<sup>410</sup> Renaissance humanism and mysticism were perfectly compatible. Even Abrabanel’s acknowledgement of magic and witchcraft as genuine phenomena in no way supports Netanyahu’s ‘medievalist’ thesis, as Maimonides, centuries earlier, had dismissed them as illusory, this stance having been mirrored by the medieval Catholic Church.<sup>411</sup> Paradoxically, it was only in Abrabanel’s own day that the Church reversed its doctrine, when, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull confirming the reality of witchcraft, condemning it and treating the denial of its efficacy heretical.<sup>412</sup> Thus, here too, Abrabanel was fully in line with a major strand of Renaissance thinking.

Whilst Abrabanel certainly sought to retain the basic hard core of tradition bequeathed to him by his spiritual ancestors, his entire exegesis is infused with the spirit of Renaissance humanism, not least in his willingness to accept and create novel ideas and illustrate their relevance to contemporary Jewish life and thought.

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<sup>409</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 162.

<sup>410</sup> Art. ‘Kabbalah’ in: The Renaissance: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, ed. I.Rachum (London & Jerusalem, 1979) 275.

<sup>411</sup> M. Baigent & R. Leigh: The Inquisition (London, 2000) 104.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid. 106.

## Chapter Three

### Abrabanel's Exegesis of I Samuel 1: Detailed Analysis

#### 1. General Introduction

Besides the thematic inter-links already referred to in the General Introduction to this dissertation, I regard the subject-matter of the biblical text selected for analysis as of exceptional interest in numerous ways. The narrative contains a vivid account of the unusual circumstances leading up to the birth of Samuel, one of the Bible's foremost spiritual leaders. It also includes a graphic description of typical domestic life in ancient Israel, a polygamous society, with the rivalries and jealousies between co-wives and the unenviable position of their common husband. It further affords us a glimpse into the conventional piety of that era, and shows how religion constituted an integral part of daily life. However, of more immediate significance for our purposes is that these themes afford Abrabanel ample scope for novel exegesis, profound psychological insights and the creation of unconventional syntactical and thematic connections between diverse phrases.

In his exegesis of this chapter, as elsewhere, we additionally find Abrabanel fulfilling his self-appointed role of 'Digester' - one who summarises the views of his exegetical predecessors on any particular topic, and, as a critic, either endorses them or exposes what he considers their weaknesses, as the case might be. These features are not unknown in the prior history of traditional biblical exegesis; thus we find Ibn Ezra citing, either approvingly or critically, his predecessors' views, and Nahmanides, similarly, regularly taking Rashi to task. However, nowhere previously is this carried out in such comprehensive and thoroughgoing fashion as with Abrabanel.

Also, in common with Abrabanel's invariable custom throughout his exposition of the Prophets, his exegesis of this chapter is preceded by six fundamental Questions (mostly further sub-divided) reflecting difficulties arising from the text. In the course of his elaborate commentary, he not only endeavours to resolve these questions, but also to illuminate many other features of the narrative.

Finally, we shall find that Abrabanel's exegesis of this chapter is heavily interwoven with *midrashic* citations, but although he makes skilful use of the *aggadah* to embellish and enrich his commentary, he never wholly surrenders to it intellectually, a ultimately subordinating its interpretations to what he regards as the contextual meaning.

Due to the exceptional length and complexity of Abrabanel's commentary to this chapter, it will not be possible to include his exegesis, and my own analysis, of every verse in the chapter. Spatial considerations have thus compelled me to select such excerpts as I regard of the greatest interest, illustrating the most distinctive features of his methodology and way of understanding Scripture.

The Book of Samuel appears to form an integral part of a schematic overall history of the Israelite nation from its earliest beginnings to the Babylonian Captivity, contained in eight books, from Genesis through to Kings. Each successive book constitutes a direct continuation of its immediate predecessor. Hence the Book of Samuel is intended as the natural continuation of the Book of Judges, which paints a vivid picture of Israelite society during the pre-monarchic era (a period lasting several centuries), characterised primarily by lawlessness and violence, with 'each man doing

what was right in his own eyes', the graphic phrase with which the author appropriately concludes.<sup>413</sup> The sequence of historical events is then continued in the Book of Samuel.

### 1.1 Links between Books of Judges and Samuel

Abrabanel instinctively felt that there was an intentional link between these two Books, and typically seizes upon the very first letter of the Book of Samuel to drive home his point. That letter is a 'Vav' (bearing the meaning 'and'). This conjunction, according to Abrabanel, is not merely stylistic, but indicates a definite link between the presently unfolding narrative and the final section of the preceding Book of Judges. Let us accordingly now examine the opening verse of Samuel in context, in the light of Abrabanel's commentary.

### 1.2 Verse 1:

'And there was a certain man from Ramathaim-Zophim in the hill-country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite'.<sup>414</sup>

1.2.1 Abrabanel comments pertinently as follows on the initial phrase, 'And there was a certain man':<sup>415</sup>

(4) *'I have already explained, in connection with the verse 'And it was after the death of Moses' (the opening verse of the Book of Joshua) that it is not (mere) linguistic*

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<sup>413</sup> Judges 21: 25.

<sup>414</sup> I Samuel 1:1.

<sup>415</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 169.

*usage to commence a narrative with a (conjunctive) ‘vav’, as R. David Kimhi thought; but it comes to connect...the forthcoming... with the preceding narrative; and since, at the end of the Book of Judges, there is related the episode of the concubine at Gibeah,<sup>416</sup> and that (it was) from that man dwelling in... the hill-country of Ephraim, and... his concubine, that great evil ensued for all Israel, (Scripture) here relates (immediately) afterwards an episode in (exact) contrast to it – that there was a certain man – also a Levite from the hill-country of Ephraim - named Elkanah, from whom and his wife Hannah great good ensued, through the birth of her son Samuel. (This deliberate juxtaposition is) so that we should not revile the Levites, or execrate the hill-country of Ephraim, from where evil emanated for Israel, since (it was) from there that the Lord also ordained blessing...<sup>417</sup>*

Abrabanel thus posits a clearly connecting thread and direct thematic link between Judges and Samuel. His argument gains strength by virtue of the fact that, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Samuel, he expressly states that the prophet Samuel authored both Judges and the first portion of Samuel.<sup>418</sup> Had Abrabanel held that these had different authors, his point would have lost much of its force, since, arguably, the ostensibly common thread was purely coincidental. It is, moreover, noteworthy that Abrabanel also held that Samuel was likewise the author of the Book of Joshua. That book commences, as Abrabanel reminds us, with the phrase ‘And it was after the death of Moses’..., suggesting a purposive continuation of the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>419</sup> Likewise, the Book of Judges commences with the similar phrase

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<sup>416</sup> See Judges 19-21.

<sup>417</sup> See Ps.133:3.

<sup>418</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 162.

<sup>419</sup> Joshua 1:1.

‘And it was after the death of Joshua’.<sup>420</sup> Thus Abrabanel not only acknowledges the intentional general thematic links between all the biblical books from Genesis to Kings, but also identifies a specific, detailed connection between the concluding narrative of Judges and the opening theme in Samuel.

With this explanation, he also simultaneously fulfils another important purpose; to emphasise and uphold the sanctity of the Levites, and ensure that no pretext is afforded for their denigration, as Samuel, one of Israel’s major prophets, who consecrated David, thereby establishing the Israelite monarchy, was himself a Levite, and that tribe continued to play an essential role in the Temple worship so central to later Israelite religion and beloved of the authors of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles.

However, on consulting other commentators, we find that both Radak and Ralbag, Abrabanel’s predecessors, offer virtually an identical interpretation, likewise stressing the link between the end of Judges and the commencement of Samuel. It is almost certain, then, that Abrabanel has lifted this interpretation from them. The question thus arises as to why he fails to cite them here, as he does regularly elsewhere. Is he guilty of plagiarism? Two points need to be made in this connection. The first is that the linkage theory had already been adopted by Ralbag from Radak without acknowledgment. Accordingly, Abrabanel may well have felt himself entitled to draw upon the same theory as being ‘common exegetical property’. In any event, plagiarism was not regarded as seriously in the medieval era as it is now. The second, and more substantive point, is that, on close comparison between the *way* the theory is presented by Abrabanel on the one hand, and by his predecessors on the other,

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<sup>420</sup> Judges 1:1.

significant differences exist. First, Abrabanel has bolstered the theory by reference to the connecting letter ‘*Vav*’ in the very first word of Samuel; and he has also expressly drawn the lesson, entirely absent from his predecessors, that there are no legitimate grounds for despising or reviling the Levites. Thus he has built upon his predecessors’ foundations, giving their view a novel twist.

Here, then, we see Abrabanel as not just a grammatical and syntactical commentator, content to supply the bare meaning of words and phrases, but as someone possessing an overall, holistic approach to biblical exegesis, viewing each section of it in the light of the others and in its historical context.

### 1.2.2 The Meaning of ‘*Ramathaim Zophim*’

The next words on which Abrabanel focuses are ‘from Ramathaim-Zophim’. The word ‘*Ramathaim*’ is in form a dual plural, indicative of twin hills. In typical fashion, before advancing his own explanation, he initially cites the traditional interpretation of the Babylonian Talmud, that there were two lofty hills in the Ephraimite hill-country, overlooking one another (‘*zophim*’), and that Elkanah resided on one of those hills. He then cites Ralbag’s alternative view that the expression ‘Ramathaim-Zophim’ is not intended merely as a description of a geographical location, but as an indication of the elevated status of Elkanah’s family, i.e. that he belonged to the ‘*anashim ha-ramathim*’ – the ‘*men of distinction*’ who could foresee the future, a group of prophets dwelling in the hill-country of Ephraim, where Samuel himself was eventually make his home. Ralbag thus assigns a dual role to these words.

Abrabanel then offers the following further possible interpretation of the word ‘*Zophim*’:

*‘...It is also possible to interpret ‘Zophim’ as a family name, insofar as they were of the children of Zuph, who is called ‘Zophai’ in the Book of Chronicles;<sup>421</sup> and you will likewise find later, in the stories of Saul and David, (the phrase) ‘they came into the land of Zuph’;<sup>422</sup> and thus (the author) here traces Elkanah’s lineage to the (original) head of the family, viz. ‘the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph’... after whose name the (surrounding) country was called...’<sup>423</sup>*

Notably, the Septuagint version of Samuel actually has the reading ‘*Zuphi*’ (‘a Zuphite’) in lieu of ‘*Zophim*’, thereby approximating to Abrabanel’s interpretation.<sup>424</sup> It is unlikely that Abrabanel was aware of this, as he did not know Greek. However, even the *masoretic* cantillation accents, appended to the traditional Hebrew text, indicate a break between the two words ‘*Ramathaim*’ and ‘*Zophim*’, suggesting that they are *not* connected in meaning, and Abrabanel may well have taken this into account when advancing this particular interpretation.<sup>425</sup>

Having discussed the plain genealogical derivation of Elkanah’s family, Abrabanel again changes tack and proceeds to offer homiletical interpretations of the names of Elkanah and his immediate ancestors alluding to their worthiness and distinction. His

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<sup>421</sup> I Chronicles 6:11.

<sup>422</sup> I Samuel 9:5.

<sup>423</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 170.

<sup>424</sup> New English Bible: Old Testament (Cambridge, 1970) 361 & fn.(a), rendering ‘a Zuphite’ in accordance with the Septuagint.

<sup>425</sup> Under the word ‘*Ramathaim*’ appears the cantillation accent ‘*tevir*’, an Aramaic word actually signifying ‘break’.

interpretations, based on verbal puns, are in the typical *style* of the Midrash, but are actually original. Thus he declares:

*'Scripture wishes to teach us... that all his (Samuel's) ancestors were God-fearing men of truth; for (the name) Elkanah alludes to (the fact) that God acquired him as His inheritance (she-kanah ha-Elohim le'nahalah lo); and similarly (the name) Jeroham (he shall be treated mercifully) indicates that his father was merciful (rahman) and beneficent to others; and likewise (the name) Elihu indicates that his grandfather cleaved to the Divine Presence (Eli-hu = He is my God)...'*<sup>426</sup>

Throughout the exegesis of this passage, Abrabanel thus shows himself to be a master of multiple interpretations, and it is this variety of fare that he offers which makes his commentary so interesting. He can appeal to literalists, allegorists, historians and philosophers alike.

Now Abrabanel starts to construct his own original thesis - that there were two adjacent hills, one named Ramah and the other Ramathah, and that one of Elkanah's wives, Peninah, lived on the former, whilst the other, Hannah, lived on the latter. Accordingly, Elkanah is appropriately described at the outset as being from Ramathaim-Zophim, since he maintained two households, one for each of his wives, in that area. Abrabanel further endeavours to prove that it was Hannah who lived in Ramathah, and that this was Elkanah's principal residence, by invoking the subsequent verse 'And they (Elkanah and Hannah) returned to their home, to

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<sup>426</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 170.

Ramathah’,<sup>427</sup> and another verse, occurring later in the book, informing us that Samuel, on completing his various judicial circuits around the country, would ‘return to Ramathah, for there was his home’.<sup>428</sup> Abrabanel suggests that Samuel intentionally chose his mother’s home for his own residence, as it was a location specifically designated for prophets.

This theory too bears the strong imprint of Abrabanel’s ingenuity, and, as will presently be seen, he utilises it subtly to resolve various subsequent difficulties posed by the text.

### 1.3 Verse 3:

Let us now turn to Abrabanel’s exposition of verse 3, which reads:

‘Now that man used to go up from his city each year to prostrate himself and to sacrifice unto the Lord of hosts in Shiloh; and there were the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, (ministering as) priests unto the Lord’.

#### 1.3.1 When did Elkanah go on Pilgrimage to Shiloh?

Before considering the chief exegetical problems in this verse, it is as well initially to dispose of a relatively minor preliminary issue, arising out of the words ‘each year’, rendered in the Hebrew by the expression ‘*mi-yamim yamimah*’. This expression appears elsewhere in Scripture (as noted by Abrabanel and other commentators) and definitely bears the connotation ‘annually’. The problem arises from the fact that, according to Exodus and Deuteronomy, every male Israelite is enjoined to make

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<sup>427</sup> I Samuel 1:19.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid. 7:17.

pilgrimage to the central Sanctuary not just once, but thrice yearly, on Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Abrabanel tackles this issue as follows:

(5) '(Scripture) relates that Elkanah's regular custom was to ascend... once a year to prostrate himself and to sacrifice, etc., which is the meaning of 'mi-yamim yamimah', as in Exodus 13:10... on the Feast of the Ingathering, which is the season of joy; or (alternatively) this phrase means 'from season to season, and from one pilgrimage-festival to the next, namely that he went to Shiloh three times each year. But the former interpretation is more correct, for (Scripture) states (subsequently) 'And so he would do year by year, on the occasion of her (Hannah) ascending to the House of the Lord', etc....'<sup>429</sup>

The *midrashic* view is indeed that Elkanah went to Shiloh thrice yearly, in accordance with the pentateuchal injunction; but Abrabanel ultimately opts for the view fitting in best, syntactically, with the text. He manifestly does not consider himself beholden to the Midrash in any way.

A little later, on the verse 'And it was upon a certain day that Elkanah sacrificed', Abrabanel cites a Midrash in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi that this was the Feast of Weeks (which contradicts his own view that it was Tabernacles).<sup>430</sup> He merely continues laconically '*And whichever festival it was, (Scripture) mentions that on a certain feast-day, Elkanah went to the Sanctuary...*'<sup>431</sup> This throwaway observation indicates that Abrabanel in no way feels himself bound by an *aggadic* statement,

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<sup>429</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 170.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.171.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

which he deems unverifiable and arbitrary. Indeed, he justifies his own view that it was Tabernacles when Elkanah attended the Sanctuary, as this festival was one of special rejoicing, celebrating, as it did, the ingathering of the annual harvest.

### 1.3.2 Further Novel Textual Linkages

#### Clerical Corruption

Besides the minor issue just mentioned, this verse gives rise to two distinct exegetical problems, both of which are highlighted within the second of the six preliminary questions posed by Abrabanel in connection with the chapter as a whole.<sup>432</sup> The first, and obvious one, is why Eli's two sons are mentioned here rather than Eli himself, who was, after all, the High Priest. The second is: what logical connection exists between Elkanah's annual visits to Shiloh and the ministrations of Hophni and Phinehas, two ostensibly separate items of information juxtaposed in the text? (Abrabanel, along with many other traditional commentators, starts from the premise that the inspired authors of Scripture did not write in a random, arbitrary fashion – and it is indeed one of the typical features of his biblical exegesis that he seeks to provide logical associations between apparently disparate phrases, or facts, juxtaposed in the narrative.)

He resolves these two problems in the following way:

(6) *'And (the purpose of Scripture in relating that) the two sons of Eli... were ministering there unto the Lord is to state that, even though Hophni and Phinehas...were (officiating) in the Sanctuary and... taking the sacrificial offerings*

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid. 169.

*(from the people) by force, and lying with the women (pilgrims), as will be mentioned later, notwithstanding all this, Elkanah did not refrain from going there year after year to prostrate himself and to sacrifice; for, because of his great righteousness, he was concerned with the worship of God, and...not with the wickedness of the priests.*<sup>433</sup>

Abrabanel has succeeded in demonstrating a logical link here, and on this occasion, it is entirely original. I consider it quite likely that he had in mind the very problem so exercising Christendom in his day, the materialism and veniality of the clergy, concerning which perennial complaints were being made by the laity, including the foremost contemporary humanist thinkers, and which would indeed constitute a major trigger for the forthcoming European Reformation. It is conceivable that Abrabanel, under one strain of humanist influence, is here reflecting the religious establishment's conventional response that the corruption of the clergy, though deeply lamentable, does not, and ought not to, invalidate the credentials of the faith they purport to profess. This phenomenon was, however, by no means confined to medieval Christendom - it existed in later biblical times amongst the ancient Israelites too. (Jeremiah laments: 'The priests did not say "Where is the Lord?"...'),<sup>434</sup> and is still prevalent today. Abrabanel has accordingly chosen to employ his exegetical skill to highlight a serious and perennial problem common to all forms of organised religion, and to suggest an appropriate response to it.

Another important issue raised by Abrabanel's 'linkage'-type methodology is a literary one. It is true that the author of Samuel mentions later in his narrative the

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>434</sup> Jeremiah 2:8.

corruption of Eli's sons and spells out their sins.<sup>435</sup> However, although those who have read on further in the Book of Samuel will know of this, someone perusing the book for the first time will, at this stage, be unaware of their moral turpitude, and thus be unable to make the logical link Abrabanel is postulating. He is indeed extrapolating backwards, utilising the information he has obtained from Chapter 2, and seeking to superimpose it onto Chapter 1. It is questionable whether this kind of exegesis is legitimate. Abrabanel himself, if pressed on the point, might, however, be able to defend his position by observing that the problem here raised is inherent within the scriptural text itself – for the author of Samuel is evidently content to refer in Chapter 1:3 to ‘the two sons of Eli’ without feeling any need to add the vital item of information that Eli was none other than the contemporary High Priest. It remains moot, but undoubtedly Abrabanel has extracted the maximum amount of exegetical ‘mileage’ from this particular verse.

#### 1.4 Verses 4-5:

##### 1.4.1 The Meaning of ‘*Apayim*’ - General

Verse 4:

‘And it was on a certain day, when Elkanah sacrificed, that he gave unto Peninah his wife, and unto all her sons and daughters, portions (gifts). But unto Hannah he gave one portion ‘*apayim*’; for he loved Hannah, but the Lord had shut up her womb’.

The main problem intriguing all the commentators in relation to these verses is the contextual meaning of the word ‘*apayim*’. The word is not a hapaxlegomenon; it does occur elsewhere in the Bible, but each time it apparently bears a different meaning. It

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<sup>435</sup> I Samuel 2: 12-17.

can connote ‘anger’ [as in Exodus 34:6: ‘*erekh apayim*’ (slow to anger)] or ‘face’ [as in Numbers 22:31: ‘*va-yikod va-yishtahu le’apav*’ (and he bowed his head and prostrated himself on his face); and Isaiah 49:23: ‘*apayim eretz yishtahavu lakh*’ (they shall prostrate themselves on their faces to the ground before you)]; but superficially, neither of these meanings appears to fit the context precisely here. It will be instructive to see precisely how Abrabanel tackles this verbal conundrum, which actually forms part of the third of the six preliminary questions he raises in connection with this chapter. In that question, containing various different elements, he queries how, if Elkanah truly loved Hannah, as the text clearly states he did, he could give her a present in a state of anger. He further ponders the reason for the apparently superfluous reiteration of ‘anger’ several times in these verses.

Verse 5:

‘And unto Hannah he gave one portion - “*apayim*”’

(7) ‘The commentators have interpreted (this expression) as ‘one worthy portion to relieve her anger and wrath’; and according to (Targum) Jonathan the meaning would be ‘a portion fit to be received in a pleasant spirit...’ Both these (interpretations) emanate from our Sages, taken from Midrash Samuel ad loc... R. Levi b. Gershon (Ralbag) interpreted ‘*apayim*’ to mean ‘face’; i.e. that she was sitting near him face to face (to enable him) to look closely at her (in a caring fashion)... The Christians have rendered ‘*apayim*’ as ‘sad’ (‘*tristis*’ in Latin), and explained that Elkanah would give Hannah just one portion, but that he was angry that he could not give more than one portion, namely because the Lord had shut her womb and that she (thus) had no children to whom he could give numerous portions, as with Peninah’s children... This is (the purport of) ‘For he loved Hannah’, viz. because he loved her

*and desired to have children from her – and as he had no children from her to whom he could give many (additional) portions, he became sad that her portion was necessarily (a single) one only...R. David Kimhi advanced this (interpretation) too, in his father's name, and it is... very attractive...<sup>436</sup>*

#### 1.4.2 Christian Exegesis

Pausing here awhile, and before proceeding to Abrabanel's own explanation, we see Abrabanel here again assuming his customary role of a Digestor of earlier commentators' views, and of a self-appointed 'Decisor' (*makhri'a*) in relation to their respective merits. He records the views of the Midrash and of Ralbag without comment, whilst contrastingly commending the Christian interpretation, held in common with Radak, which appeals to him on account of its novelty. He appreciates its retaining the meaning 'anger' for '*apayim*', whilst simultaneously reconciling the existence of such anger with the love Elkanah felt for Hannah. Elkanah was not angry with *Hannah*, but at the situation in which he found himself, of being unable to bestow gifts on her extended family. Such an interpretation demonstrates psychological insight, and Abrabanel is decidedly partial towards it. The fact that its source is Christian does not trouble him, for, as already observed, he is prepared to adopt Christian exegesis on non-doctrinal issues.<sup>437</sup> In any event, the identical explanation is offered by the traditional exegete Radak. In such circumstances, it is noteworthy that Abrabanel discloses that it was also advanced by the Christian commentators – he could easily have cited it in Radak's name alone. In my view, this illustrates the extent of his intellectual broad-mindedness, highly unusual for a Jewish commentator in that era.

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<sup>436</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 171.

<sup>437</sup> See Chapter 5.

### 1.4.3 Abrabanel's Own Interpretations

At this stage, he introduces his own interpretation. Intrigued by the dual plural form of '*apayim*', which had been ignored by the other commentators, he accordingly postulates that this word denotes two distinct causes of anger and anguish experienced by Elkanah. The first was, of course, Hannah's lack of children, and the second was Peninah's vexing her over this. Abrabanel here neatly invokes his linkage-type exegesis again, connecting the end of verse 5: 'The Lord had shut her womb', with verse 6: 'And (that) her rival vexed her sore, so as to make her fret, in (saying to her) that the Lord had shut her womb'.<sup>438</sup>

Notably, in order to sustain his theory of the two causes of anger, Abrabanel has not only to link verses 5 and 6, but also to make two subtle additions to the latter verse. First, he has to render the phrase '*ve-khi'asat'ah tzaratah gam ka'as*' as equivalent to '*ve-she-khi'asat'ah tzaratah gam ka'as*' – that he, Elkanah, was angry *because* her rival Peninah vexed her so sorely. Secondly, he has to insert an explanatory clause into the narrative, that the vexation was due to Peninah's *saying to Hannah* that the Lord had shut her womb. One may wonder why Abrabanel needs to resort to this ostensibly artificial exegesis. The answer is twofold. He must initially explain the reason for the otherwise unnecessary repetition of the phrase 'for the Lord had shut her womb' in both verses 5 and 6, and he further needs to explain the significance of the somewhat enigmatic phrase '*gam ka'as*' ('*an additional anger*') in verse 6. Since Abrabanel proceeds from the premise that no word or phrase in inspired Scripture can be random or superfluous,<sup>439</sup> he is compelled to advance this kind of interpretation. To

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<sup>438</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 171.

<sup>439</sup> This is evident from the fact that in a great many of his Questions, he notes that the passage, or phrase, in issue is ostensibly otiose – '*ve'hu kefel mevo'ar!*'

the modern mind, of course, such exegesis is over-subtle - it will be recalled in this connection that Richard Simon, sometimes considered the founder of modern biblical criticism, regarded it as such – but, granted Abrabanel’s theological premises – which he shared with numerous other medieval commentators – it is a perfectly logical way of dealing with the matter.<sup>440</sup>

Not content with the theory of the two causes of Elkanah’s anger just presented, Abrabanel offers yet another explanation of the key expression ‘*gam ka’as*’, of a very different, distinctly *psychological* nature. He says that Peninah would anger Hannah not only by taunting her for her childlessness, but on account of some other, trivial matter too:

(8) ‘*For when a person who is (already in a state of) sadness and worry about a great trouble, when another (cause of) anguish befalls him, be it ...small or great, will recall to mind his major troubles, and that minor trouble will (thus) have a huge effect upon him – not on its own account but because it reminds him of his other, overwhelming trouble... that is why (Scripture) states that ‘her rival (Peninah) would anger Hannah with an additional cause, in order to make her fret’... not on account of that (extraneous) small issue, but because of the innate anguish within her that the Lord had shut her womb...*’<sup>441</sup>

This interpretation reveals Abrabanel as a commentator with profound insight into human nature; but at the same time, he invariably tries his best to fit his philosophical or psychological interpretations into the wording of the biblical text. This is done very

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<sup>440</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>441</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 171.

subtly; occasionally the interpretations may seem contrived, but they are nonetheless always intriguing and never lacking in novelty and ingenuity.

### 1.5 Verse 7:

‘And so he did year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; and she wept and did not eat.’

#### 1.5.1 Aggadic Themes

We have already noted instances where Abrabanel interweaves *aggadic* notions into the fabric of his complex exegesis. He now introduces the well-known Midrash that Peninah’s taunting of Hannah was motivated by holy intentions – to induce her to pray more fervently for a child. However, as will presently be seen, he does not simply cite the *aggadic* passage *per se*, but utilises it to fit into his own rather different exegetical framework. It is instructive to examine this in more detail.

Abrabanel writes:

*‘And our Sages, in Bava Batra have stated: ‘R. Levi said: “... Peninah’s intention was for the sake of Heaven”,<sup>442</sup> and (on this) R. Abraham b. David explained that the anger (Peninah caused Hannah)...was so that she (Hannah) should pray and complain to the Holy One, blessed be He, and plead for mercy; for since her husband loved her (in any case), she was neglecting to plead for mercy...’<sup>443</sup>*

Notably, Abrabanel here displays his expertise in the field of rabbinics, displaying

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<sup>442</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Bava Batra 16a.

<sup>443</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 171.

familiarity with the work of the *halakhist* Abraham b. David ('Ra'avad') of Posquieres.

Now Abrabanel cleverly fits this *aggadic* passage into the general framework of his own exegesis. One of the sub-questions comprised in his comprehensive third question on this chapter is why Peninah chose to vex Hannah exclusively at the time when she used to go up to the Sanctuary, as explicitly stated in verse 7: 'So would he do year after year... whenever she would go up to the House of the Lord, she would provoke her'. Abrabanel remarks in this connection, employing the *aggadah* to resolve that particular problem:

*'And according to the view of our Sages...who said that Peninah ('s provocation) was for a good purpose, we may say that the reason she provoked Hannah only when she went up to the House of the Lord was so that she (Hannah) would (be induced to) pray to the Lord there and weep bitterly...'<sup>444</sup>*

The idea is that the Sanctuary, being inherently enveloped in an aura of holiness, would naturally be the most conducive location for Hannah to pray with genuine fervour.

### 1.5.2 Two Other, Non-Aggadic Interpretations

But again, in characteristic fashion, Abrabanel is not content to allow the *midrashic* view to have the final word. He accordingly now proceeds to provide an alternative

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

solution to the question as to why Peninah's provocation of Hannah was confined to the pilgrimage seasons. He ventures:

*'And it is further possible to say... that Peninah and Hannah were not (living) in one city, since Hannah was in Ramathah and Peninah in Ramah; and because they only came together when they went up to the House of the Lord...(Scripture) states that Peninah would provoke Hannah to anger when they went up to the House of the Lord; for at other times they never met!'*<sup>445</sup>

Thus Abrabanel has neatly made use of the superficially surprising information contained in verse 7 to verify his theory of Elkanah's two separate households, at Ramah and Ramathah, suggested by the phraseology of verse 1. This interpretation is extremely practical, and characteristic of Abrabanel. For good measure, Abrabanel adds another explanation, which he maintains is 'consistent with the simple meaning' of the narrative:

*'We may say further that the anger (of Hannah) was over the gifts (distributed by Elkanah); for since Elkanah only gave them when they went up to the House of the Lord, it was at that time that the provocation and anger occurred...'*<sup>446</sup>

Presumably the reason why Abrabanel considers this final interpretation as corresponding to the verse's simple meaning is that we are expressly informed both that Elkanah distributed the gifts on occasions when he offered sacrifice (in the Sanctuary) and that Peninah provoked Hannah when she visited the Sanctuary. The

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

other two explanations, for all their ingenuity, are ultimately more indirect and speculative. A characteristic feature of Abrabanel's exegesis is to offer several possible alternative explanations, which he generally, though not invariably, weighs up against one another, with an eventual declared preference. Here he does not indicate his preference, however, apparently according equal weight to all three.

### 1.6 Verses 12-14: Hannah's 'Drunkenness'

We now turn to Abrabanel's exposition of verses 12-14. In the course of this exposition, he attempts to deal with his fourth major question in connection with this chapter. These verses read:

'And it was, as she multiplied her prayers before the Lord, that Eli observed her mouth. And Hannah...was speaking from the heart; only her lips moved but her voice could not be heard; and Eli deemed her a drunkard. And Eli said unto her: "how long will you be drunk? Remove your wine from yourself!"'

Paraphrasing Abrabanel's question, a state of inebriation is reached as a result of drinking an excess of wine. How could Eli, therefore, have challenged her with the question 'How long will you drink yourself to a stupor?' – for by then she was no longer actually drinking, but was, as he perceived it, already totally inebriated. Similarly, what sense did it make for him to command her 'Remove your wine from yourself!', as she obviously could not do so once she had already drunk it?

Abrabanel, expressly repudiating Radak's view that Eli merely meant to ask Hannah how long she intended to *appear to be drunk* as inconsistent with the verse's literal meaning,<sup>447</sup> resolves the problem thus:

(9) '*I think that, because Elkanah and his wives used to come there each year, Eli had become fond of them, and since on this occasion he saw Hannah in this state, he became enraged... that she was drunk, and said to her 'How long will you be drunk? Remove your wine from yourself!'* - ...he was not referring to the wine she had already drunk, but... to the future; it was now appropriate that she should no longer continue drinking wine (altogether), so that she should not become drunk...that is (the meaning of) what he (Eli) said: 'How long will you get drunk?' i.e. on a daily basis, which would involve great... embarrassment...therefore it would be best that she distance herself from drunkenness by refraining from... wine altogether...'<sup>448</sup>

Thus far, the entire issue appears somewhat trite. Abrabanel's interpretation, that Hannah should cease her habitual drinking henceforth, seems obvious and the only realistic way to understand the text. Indeed, besides Radak, whose own interpretation is questionable, none of the other early commentators trouble to address the issue altogether. One might wonder what novel element Abrabanel wishes to introduce. However, his succeeding remarks serve to lift the quality of his interpretation from a pedestrian to an almost inspired level. For, at this point, he introduces into his discussion a reference to the celebrated Aristotelian 'Golden Mean'<sup>449</sup> – adoption of

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid. 169, citing Radak to I Samuel 1:13. Abrabanel's point is that if Eli thought that Hannah only *appeared* to be drunk, by her demeanour, he would not have ordered her to 'remove her wine from herself', but to alter her demeanour.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid. 172-173.

<sup>449</sup> Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics: Book 2:05.

the middle path in moral and ethical qualities – and the best method of achieving this, as adumbrated by Maimonides.<sup>450</sup> He accordingly observes:<sup>451</sup>

*(10) ‘For... it would be appropriate for a man to set right the despicable character traits he happens to have by (recourse to) the method employed by those (engaged in) straightening (crooked) rods – that they bend them right over to the opposite extremity, so that, when they return to their natural state, they will remain in a median position...In accordance with this (notion), Eli ordered Hannah that... to avoid drunkenness, she should avoid drinking wine altogether, which is the opposite extreme... and in the (Talmudic) Tractate Ketubot it is taught: “One cup (of wine) is excellent for a woman, two (cups) are shameful...”*<sup>452</sup>

Aristotle's notion, cited here by Abrabanel, had long since been embraced by Maimonides. As an avid student of Maimonides' works, Abrabanel was familiar with it, skilfully invoking the Golden Mean here to lend full force to his understanding of Eli's exhortation to Hannah that she should 'remove her wine from herself' – i.e. that she should cease drinking wine altogether for the foreseeable future to rid herself of her apparent propensity for drunkenness. The additional Talmudic citation is intended to lend further force to Abrabanel's implied premise that wine imbibed by women in moderation is healthy, but harmful in excess.

It is arguable that Abrabanel is guilty here of anachronism, by attributing to Eli, a High Priest in ancient Israel, a sophisticated philosophical concept first adumbrated

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<sup>450</sup> Maimonides: Mishneh Torah I (Jerusalem, 1982) 23, 24. (Hilkhot De'ot 1:4; 2:2).

<sup>451</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 173; cf. Commentary to Genesis, 217.

<sup>452</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Ketubot 65a.

only centuries later, by Aristotle. Yet it is not inconceivable for Eli, or the author of Samuel placing words in his mouth, to have instinctively espoused this notion in a simplistic, practical way, without all its subsequent trimmings and philosophical development.

### 1.7 Verse 20: The Name ‘Samuel’

‘And it was with the passage of the period of days, that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel (Heb. Sh’muel) for (she said) “I requested him from the Lord” (*‘ki me-Adonai she’iltiv’*).’

In common with other commentators, Abrabanel is concerned with the precise derivation of the prophet’s name. The problem lies in the fact that the derivation given in the verse itself seems incongruous, since the root *sha’al* (to request) does not contain the Hebrew letter ‘*mem*’, which forms an integral part of the name *Sh’muel*.

Abrabanel comments:<sup>453</sup>

(11) ‘...It would have been fitting, on this account, for him to have been called Saul (Heb. *Sha’ul*), and the commentators have not given a correct reason for this (incongruity) ...I think, in this connection, that one of three alternatives (must be adopted).either she intended (to convey) by this name that God (‘El’) put him (Heb. *samo*) in the world – hence she called him ‘Sh’muel’ as though to say that God placed him (there); and she said ‘For I have requested him from the Lord’,... and He placed him inside me; or she intended (to convey) by this name that Sh’muel was from God Almighty, blessed be He... ‘Sh’muel’ being equivalent to ‘she-me’El’ (the one who

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<sup>453</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 173-174.

was from God)...or it is also possible to say that ‘*Sh’muel*’ is equivalent to ‘*she’mo El*’ (his name is God) – since all divine things are called by the name of the Holy One... as (we find that Jacob) called the altar he made ‘*El-Elohe-Yisrael*’ (God, the God of Israel);<sup>454</sup> and the prophet (Isaiah) said (in reference to King Ahaz’s son) “And his name shall be called *Pele-joez-El-Gibbor*” (Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God), etc...<sup>455</sup>

Evidently Abrabanel has invested much thought into this matter. All three alternative derivations proposed by him are undeniably ingenious, though the second, in particular, seems rather far-fetched, whilst the first involves the controversial substitution of the Hebrew letter ‘*sin*’ for a ‘*shin*’. The third alternative is the most straightforward and has, moreover, some scriptural backing.<sup>456</sup> It is strange, however, that none of these three derivations seem to accord with that provided by the verse itself, problematic though that derivation is. Abrabanel appears to be departing from his own well-established exegetical principle of adhering as closely as possible to the wording of the text. What is even stranger is that Abrabanel does not even consider the possibility of ‘*Sh’muel*’ being an abbreviated form of ‘*sha’ul me-El*’ (‘requested from God’), which seems inherently the most plausible explanation, and is indeed the one adopted explicitly by Radak<sup>457</sup> (and implicitly by Rashi<sup>458</sup> and Ralbag<sup>459</sup>) as well as most modern exegetes. Evidently, Abrabanel is unwilling to concede that the derivation of a biblical name need not be absolutely precise. However, he has seemingly overlooked the various other biblical instances of imprecise, approximate

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<sup>454</sup> Genesis 33:20.

<sup>455</sup> Isaiah 9:5.

<sup>456</sup> See citation from Abrabanel immediately above.

<sup>457</sup> See Radak to I Samuel 1:20.

<sup>458</sup> See Rashi *ad loc.*

<sup>459</sup> See Gersonides *ad loc.*

derivations cited in this connection by Ralbag. One is compelled to conclude that, in this instance, Abrabanel has overreached himself and allowed his immense capacity for ingenuity to deviate unnecessarily from the path of syntactically accurate scriptural interpretation.

### 1.8 Verses 11; 26-28: Hannah's Vow – *Halakhic* Ramifications

Verse 11:

'And she made a vow and said: "O Lord of Hosts, if You take note of the affliction of Your maidservant, and... remember me and... do not forget Your maidservant, and give Your maidservant male offspring, then I shall give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall not come upon his head" '.

Verses 26-28:

'And she said (to Eli) "I beg you, my lord...I am the woman who was standing with you here to pray unto the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord granted me my request that I asked of Him. And also I have lent him unto the Lord – all the days that he shall live, he is lent unto the Lord" ...'

The final issue here selected for analysis is that posed by Abrabanel in the fifth of the six major questions he raises in connection with the exegesis of this chapter. It is a strictly *halakhic* one. Paraphrasing his question, he wonders how Hannah's vow (recorded in verse 11) made to God that, if He grants her a male child, she will dedicate him to His perpetual service as a Nazirite ('and a razor shall not come upon his head'), could be regarded as valid, in light of the *mishnaic* ruling that only a man may dedicate his son, by way of a vow, as a Nazirite, not a woman.<sup>460</sup> He additionally

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<sup>460</sup> Mishnah: Nazir 4:6.

queries how a vow can be valid in connection with an, as yet, non-existent entity – for Samuel had not yet been born at the time Hannah made her vow (and there was no certainty that she would even conceive, let alone give birth to a healthy male child).

This question is presented by Abrabanel as original, but is actually identical to that earlier posed by Radak, and it is virtually certain that Abrabanel lifted it from him. In this particular instance, Abrabanel's originality lies in the answer he provides to the question, left open by Radak, who indeed expresses great surprise as to the total silence of both Talmud and Midrash on this point.

Before examining Abrabanel's answer, some background information must be provided. First, the Babylonian Talmud, in accordance with R. Yohanan's prevailing view, declares<sup>461</sup> that the law that a man may validly make a vow dedicating his son to Naziriteship, is an oral '*halakhah* received by Moses from Sinai', without any logical or scriptural basis, and indeed Maimonides so rules.<sup>462</sup> This naturally reinforces Radak's and Abrabanel's question, since, if even in the case of a man, a solid foundation for the law is lacking, how much less should it apply to a woman. It is, moreover, interesting in this connection that the School of Shammai held that even a man had no power to vow his son to Naziriteship.<sup>463</sup> Secondly, Maimonides declares,<sup>464</sup> in accordance with the view of R. Nehorai recorded in the Mishnah, that Samuel was indeed a Nazirite.<sup>465</sup> Thus, in light of these considerations, Radak's

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<sup>461</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Nazir 28b.

<sup>462</sup> Maimonides: Mishneh Torah IV, 125. (Hilkhot Nezirut 2:14).

<sup>463</sup> Palestinian Talmud: Nazir 19b.

<sup>464</sup> Maimonides: Mishneh Torah IV, 133. (Hilkhot Nezirut 3:16).

<sup>465</sup> Mishnah: Nazir 9:5.

question (adopted by Abrabanel) gains further traction, and, as might be expected, Abrabanel's resolution of it, upon which we shall now focus, is entirely original.

Abrabanel deals with this question in the context of Hannah's address to Eli on the occasion of her presentation of her newly-weaned son to the Sanctuary in fulfilment of her vow. After dismissing the opinions of 'the commentators' and of Ralbag, he writes:

(12) '*... I accordingly think... that since Elkanah and Hannah his wife brought the child to Eli together... Hannah was concerned that Eli would have the same (halakhic) problem as I have raised...; namely, why did Elkanah not make the vow that Samuel should become a Nazirite, rather than Hannah, since in law, (only) a man may vow his son to Naziriteship, but a woman may not?... Accordingly, Hannah said "My lord, do not think that because we are bringing the child together, we, Elkanah my husband and I, were... equal partners in (relation to) him. That is not so; for it was for my sake... alone that the child was born!" That is the meaning of the expression 'bi adoni', meaning 'it was for my sake...' And she (proceeded to) explain why it was for her sake and not her husband's, saying "I was the woman who was standing with you in this place to pray to the Lord"; and as it was I who was standing here, and not Elkanah...the child ('s existence) was... on my account; and just as I stood here, and not Elkanah, so (too) it was I who prayed for this child' (meaning, he, Elkanah, did not pray for him either in this place...or anywhere else) and thus it was through me... that the child came into existence - through my prayer". She further said "And the Lord granted me my request", etc. (meaning , God...gave him to me and...not to Elkanah my husband") – and from this it necessarily follows that "It is*

*also I who has lent him to the Lord”(meaning) “just as (it was) I (who) stood on my watch concerning him, and I (who) prayed for him, and God gave him to me alone, so too it is within my power to make a vow concerning him and to give him to the Lord”.*

*...This is the meaning of “And (it is) also I who has lent him to the Lord” ...<sup>466</sup>*

Abrabanel is essentially pleading special circumstances on Hannah's behalf, which Eli should take into account to override the general law. In other words, the argument Abrabanel attributes to Hannah is: 'had this been a normal birth, where both father and mother are equally involved, the father alone is entitled to make a vow dedicating the son to a life of Naziriteship; but here, Elkanah played no role in the preliminary prayers that I offered for the birth of a son – hence the decision to make him a Nazirite lies with me alone'. Although this is not the type of response likely to appeal to a rigid *halakhist*, it undeniably has a certain *emotional quality* characteristic of a woman, especially one who has just surmounted a crisis. However, it seems unlikely that Hannah, knowing full well her husband's piety, how much he loved her and how supportive of her he had been throughout her lengthy period of childlessness, would now effectively seek to exclude him from all further spiritual connection with the child. It is also far-fetched to assume that Hannah was merely adopting this stance as a ploy, to convince Eli to override the general *halakhic* principles applicable in this case, as Abrabanel gives no hint of this in his commentary on the passage.

1.9 I would summarise my analysis of this final item of exegesis thus:

- Abrabanel evinces a sound appreciation of *halakhah*. Although admittedly his was not original, he nonetheless fully appreciates its *halakhic* significance.

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<sup>466</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 175.

- He displays his characteristic ingenuity and independence of mind in the formulation of his response to the *halakhic* problem confronting him.
- Although his response is not of a strictly *halakhic* nature, he cannot be accused of overriding tradition in this instance, since, as Radak noted, neither the Talmud nor the Midrash had previously addressed the question.
- He shows somewhat less than his usual degree of psychological insight here, as explained above.
- His prime concern is apparently to ensure that his theory fits neatly into the actual wording of the biblical text. His theory centres around Hannah acting on her own account – accordingly Abrabanel brings out the full force of words reiterated in Hannah's address to Eli such as '*ani*' and '*anokhi*' ('I'), and '*li*' ('to me'). He further exploits the double meaning of the word '*bi*'. Whilst it generally appears in the Bible as an exclamation ('*O!*'), it can also bear the connotation '*in me*'. This latter meaning is the one Abrabanel, with his fine feeling for the niceties of Biblical Hebrew idiom, attaches to it in the phrase '*bi adoni*'.
- It might be objected by non-traditional scholars that the entire question posed by Radak and Abrabanel is invalid, as the law appearing in the Mishnah was only formulated many centuries after the composition of the Book of Samuel, and thus did not exist at the time when the biblical narrative took place. Such an objection would, however, to my mind, be entirely invalid, since Abrabanel, like all other traditional Jewish commentators, unquestioningly accepted the Sinaitic origin of the Oral Law, and such a solution of the problem could never have occurred to him.

## 2. Conclusions

One encounters within Abrabanel's exposition of this chapter an immensely wide range of themes and types of exegesis - philological, verbal and syntactical, as, for example, in regard to the possible meanings of the phrase '*Ramathaim-Zophim*' in Verse 1, the key word '*apayim*' in Verse 5, and the phrase '*ve-khi'asat'ah tzaratah gam ka'as*' in Verse 6.

Additionally, Abrabanel displays here, as elsewhere, a holistic approach to scriptural interpretation, revealing hitherto unsuspected thematic links between ostensibly unconnected material – even between two separate Books of the Bible (Judges and Samuel). More generally, there is no shortage of novel ideas emanating from his pen, and even where he does borrow notions from his exegetical predecessors (in this instance Radak and Ralbag) he usually develops them in an original manner, and gives them a fresh twist.

Moreover, this exceptionally versatile commentator has managed, somewhat unexpectedly, even to incorporate Christian exegesis, and endorse it, as is his habit on occasion. Besides this novelty, the reader is introduced not only to *philosophical* notions such as the Aristotelian Golden Mean, but to several profound *psychological* insights into the workings of human nature, all of which we have highlighted above. We have further seen how Abrabanel ventures boldly into the *halakhic* realm in his exegesis of this chapter, and remarked upon the unconventional method he employs to resolve the *halakhic* problems he raises.

Abrabanel has also introduced a significant amount of *midrashic* material into his commentary. However, he is never a slave to the Midrash; he employs it cleverly and selectively, endeavouring to integrate and interweave it into his own complex, and essentially rationalistic framework. His omissions of certain *midrashic* items are also significant. For example, he chooses to omit all reference to the well-known but rather bizarre *aggadic* passage relating that Eli wished to put the two-year old infant Samuel to death for having publicly contradicted him on a detailed *halakhic* point, and that Hannah pleaded with Eli to spare her son because he was God's special gift to her and, as such, was irreplaceable.<sup>467</sup> Such a Midrash does not fit into Abrabanel's exegetical framework, and presumably he considers it has nothing of moral or spiritual value to impart.

All these varied ingredients serve to enrich the quality of Abrabanel's commentary, elevating it far above the level of the mundane. He writes simultaneously in the spirit of a traditional medieval Jewish commentator and a Renaissance humanist, with one foot in each camp; this blend is extremely rare amongst Jewish exegetical contemporaries.

This chapter does not contain any of the particularly radical ideas one occasionally finds elsewhere in his commentaries, e.g. his severe condemnation of King David in the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah, his challenges to traditional rabbinic biblical chronology, criticisms of the grammar, syntax and style of the Prophets, and of traditional views on the authorship of various biblical books. Such radical notions are, arguably, insufficiently abundant to justify categorising him as a genuinely

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<sup>467</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 31b.

*revolutionary* exegete. His theological and philosophical conceptions are, moreover, decidedly conservative. The overall picture he presents, to my mind, after an intense study of his exegetical works, is that of a highly rational, flexible and tolerant conservative. His rationality and flexibility are amply illustrated by his treatment of the Garden of Eden narrative, where he rejects the strictly traditional view of the ‘speaking serpent’; his fundamental conservatism, *per contra*, is apparent from his refusal to allegorise the entire story. And for evidence of his tolerant approach, one need look no further than his occasional positive evaluation of Christian exegesis.

It would naturally be unrealistic to expect Abrabanel, a Renaissance-era exegete, to produce a work in the spirit of modern biblical criticism. He is, after all, writing for the Jewish religious intelligentsia of his own time. But he is nonetheless quite radical and forward-looking by the standards of his own times, bu which his exegesis must ultimately be judged.

Abrabanel’s presentation of his variegated material here, as elsewhere, is logical and coherent. In this chapter, he strictly follows the general methodological scheme he has adopted for his commentaries on the Former and Latter Prophets – initially posing six fundamental questions (frequently further sub-divided) articulating what he regards as serious exegetical problems arising out of the biblical text, and then, within the body of his commentary, attempting to resolve them all in turn. His resolutions of these problems are, as always with Abrabanel, skilfully interwoven into the remainder of his commentary, which includes discussion of numerous other issues besides those covered by the questions.

Whilst this ‘question-and-answer’ technique (or, as Saperstein dubs it, ‘The Method of Doubts’) is not unique to Abrabanel and was also employed by two other Jewish commentators of his era, Isaac Arama in ‘Aqedat Yitzhak’ and Isaac Karo in ‘Toledot Yitzhak’, neither perfected the technique to such a degree of mathematical precision as did Abrabanel. (Only within the world of late medieval Christian biblical scholarship do we encounter a similar degree of precision, in the person of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century Catholic ecclesiastic Alfonso Tostado, to whose methodological style and format Abrabanel may be indebted.<sup>468)</sup>

Abrabanel’s compositional style is invariably lucid and coherent, free from any trace of mysticism. He is, however, often inordinately expansive and unnecessarily repetitive. This feature of his writing is one of which he was well aware, and indeed, in the Introduction to his Commentary to Samuel, he expressly apologises to the reader for having just dwelt at excessive length with the differences between Samuel and Chronicles, and Kings and Chronicles, respectively.<sup>469</sup> However, he often felt that extensive elaboration of a theme was necessary for clarification.

Despite his unfortunate tendency to stylistic prolixity – a feature common to the entire gamut of his exegetical and philosophical works and repeatedly remarked upon adversely by his critics over the centuries – the patient reader will be duly rewarded by finding his understanding and appreciation of the Bible immensely enhanced through a careful study of Abrabanel’s exegesis.

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<sup>468</sup> See Introduction (Literature Review) referring to Gaon’s dissertation (Univ. of London, 1939).

<sup>469</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 167.

## Chapter Four

### Religion and Politics: A Survey of Abrabanel's Political Views as Reflected in his Biblical Exegesis

#### 1. General

This chapter contains a detailed discussion of Abrabanel's political ideology, in particular on the relative merits of monarchical, republican and theocratic systems of government.<sup>470</sup> Its purpose is to demonstrate both how his personal experiences in the diplomatic arena over fifty years influenced his religious opinions, and, conversely, how his core religious beliefs shaped his political thought. That there was indeed an inter-link between these two aspects of his life and career is not self-evident, as many individuals succeed in rigidly compartmentalising them. However, as will be demonstrated below, Abrabanel was decidedly not one of these.

There is considerable modern secondary literature relating to this study. Chief amongst this is probably Netanyahu's biography of Abrabanel, cited extensively in my biographical chapter and elsewhere throughout this dissertation, and other scholars such as Leo Strauss, Fritz (Yitzhak) Baer, Abraham Melamed, Reuven Kimelman, and Aviezer Ravitsky (not an exhaustive list). Their respective views will be duly analysed in chronological sequence, and subjected to criticism as and where appropriate. Although this chapter consists largely of an analysis of these scholars' views, my own, based both on primary sources and secondary literature, will also be advanced.

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<sup>470</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that all these three forms of government exist within the context of the world's present state, whilst for Abrabanel, the ultimately ideal way of life for mankind is a return to the primal state of nature such as existed in the Garden of Eden, and again, shortly after the Flood, prior to the building of the Tower of Babel. See Chapter 2 above.

1.1 The specific issues to be covered in the present survey are:

- What precisely were Abrabanel's considered views on Monarchy, Republicanism and Theocracy?
- To what extent were these derived from his religious ideology and understanding of Scripture? and/or his Renaissance humanist leanings and his own personal experiences.
- How did his political views on these and related subjects influence his interpretation of Scripture?

(The tangential issue of the various factors impelling him to adopt a political career and persist in it almost throughout his life, despite all his vicissitudes, has already been discussed in my biographical chapter.)

## 1.2 Abrabanel's Views on Monarchy

It is hardly controversial that Abrabanel's views on monarchy as an institution were fundamentally negative, as is clear from his elaborate exposition of the relevant biblical passages in I Samuel 8 and Deuteronomy 17, which will be analysed comprehensively below. However, as both Netanyahu<sup>471</sup> and others have correctly observed, his stance is not totally negative, but somewhat more nuanced, since, for example, he declares unequivocally that it is prohibited by Divine decree to assassinate even a tyrannical ruler<sup>472</sup> (a view he made plain to the Portuguese nobles who initially confided in him in their abortive conspiracy to overthrow Joao II). It is also undisputed that, not only did he serve the Portuguese sovereign Alfonso V

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<sup>471</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 173-194.

<sup>472</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 170-171.

(whom he praises highly in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua)<sup>473</sup> for many years, both as Treasurer and general political adviser, but he also accepted a similar position at the Spanish court under Ferdinand and Isabella.<sup>474</sup> Similarly, after the Expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492, he attached himself to King Ferrante of Naples, remaining close to him and his son and successor Alfonso.<sup>475</sup>

Another, frequently overlooked, instance of Abrabanel's nuanced stance on the institution of monarchy occurs in his commentary to Deuteronomy 17:14 and I Samuel 8, where he clearly distinguishes between the Gentile nations on the one hand, whom he concedes might require a monarch to lead them in war and administer justice, and Israel, who, being subject to direct Divine Providence, have no need of any earthly ruler, on the other.

In his commentary to I Samuel 8, he expressly dissents from the views of all his cited exegetical predecessors.<sup>476</sup> They assert that Samuel's objection to the Israelites' demand for a king was not to their request as such but rather to the manner in which they expressed it: 'Give us now a king to judge us, like all the nations!'<sup>477</sup> His own opinion is that Samuel opposed the request itself, and he adduces proof from the wording of the relevant verses.<sup>478</sup> He cites, in combination, the three verses, viz. I Samuel 12:12: 'And you said to me: "No! But a king shall reign over us", whereas the Lord your God is your King'; I Samuel 12:17: 'And be aware and see that the evil you have done is great in the sight of the Lord to request a king for yourselves!'; and I

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<sup>473</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

<sup>474</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 38-40.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid. 63-65.

<sup>476</sup> I Samuel 8:4.

<sup>477</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 202-211.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid. 205.

Samuel 12:19: ‘For we have added evil to all our sins by requesting a king!’ He further insists that there was no precept in Deuteronomy 17 *mandating* the appointment of a king.<sup>479</sup> A close reading of the relevant text

‘When you come to the land that the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and you will say, “I shall set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me” - You shall surely set over yourself a king whom the Lord your God shall choose...’<sup>480</sup>

suggests that Deuteronomy merely *allows for this* as an option, stipulating that if at any time, the people desired a king, he must be appointed with Divine approval, and be of Israelite descent.<sup>481</sup> Such an interpretation, though entirely consistent with the *literal* meaning of the Deuteronomic passage, is plainly against the *halakhic* consensus, as codified by Maimonides in his compendium, Mishneh Torah.<sup>482</sup> It also conflicts with the mainstream opinion in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>483</sup> However, Abrabanel does cite R. Nehorai’s dissenting view in support of his own stance.<sup>484</sup>

Another argument advanced by Abrabanel, which he regards as clinching, is that, if the appointment of a monarch had indeed been mandatory, as the traditional view

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>480</sup> Deuteronomy 17: 14-15.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid. 17:15.

<sup>482</sup> Maimonides: Mishneh Torah VII, 176-177 (Hilkhot Melakhim 1:1); cf. Sefer ha-Hinukh II: [Commandment 497] (Jerusalem, 1992) 768-770.

<sup>483</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 20 b; see also Sifre to Deut. 17:14, which cites both the accepted view of R. Judah and R. Nehorai’s dissenting view (supporting Abrabanel’s position).

<sup>484</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 167. Abrabanel attributes the dissenting view to R. Nehemiah, but this is no error, since the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 147b; Eruvin 13b), certainly according to one tradition, states that R. Nehorai’s true name was R. Nehemiah, and Maimonides reiterates this in the Introduction to his Commentary to the Mishnah, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1963) 29.

maintains, why did Joshua, and all the elders and judges who succeeded him as leaders over the next few centuries, not observe this Divine command?<sup>485</sup>

Abrabanel further, in his commentary to I Samuel 8:4, extols the virtues of republican, or oligarchic, government, since, as he explains, the considered decisions of several elected individuals acting jointly are likely to be more correct and less liable to error than those of a single, absolute ruler.<sup>486</sup> He offers as examples of successful republican/oligarchic rule the era of the Roman consuls (when he maintains Rome was at the peak of its glory), and the contemporary Italian city-states of Venice, Florence, Genoa, Lucca, Siena and Bologna, all specifically mentioned by him.<sup>487</sup> His scriptural exemplar for such a form of government is the pre-monarchical period, when Israel was governed by elders and judges.

### 1.3 Modern Scholarship

An early 20th century scholar dealing with Abrabanel's stance on monarchy, Leo Strauss, in his 1937 Cambridge lecture on Abrabanel, made several novel and interesting points, some of which I believe to be more valid than others.

He contends that Abrabanel's central discussion of monarchy is based on Scripture only; hence Scripture alone can reveal his authentic conception of the ideal form of human government.<sup>488</sup> This is not the republic as such, but a 'republican government,

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<sup>485</sup> Idem: Commentary to Samuel, 205.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid. 205,206.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid. 206. Abrabanel's list, however, fails to distinguish between Republics and Principalities or city-states.

<sup>488</sup> Strauss: 'On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 117.

instituted and guided by God' – namely, a theocracy.<sup>489</sup> In practical terms, Strauss contends, pending the messianic era, Abrabanel favoured a mixed constitution, i.e. 'an aristocracy near to democracy', and this indeed is his ideal, as presented by Menasseh b. Israel in his 'Conciliador'.<sup>490</sup> Although Strauss does not say so explicitly, Abrabanel's theocratic ideal would surely have applied only to Israel, not the Gentiles.

Strauss conjectures that it is unlikely that Abrabanel would have been 'a genuine and unreserved admirer of the worldly greatness of Rome and Venice', and suggests that his praise of the Venetian Republic may have been merely a tribute he paid to contemporary fashion.<sup>491</sup> This may ultimately be correct, though it is pertinent to observe that he was well-received in Venice, where his diplomatic skills were both employed and appreciated.

However, Strauss is on far shakier ground in claiming that Abrabanel's idea that the Deuteronomic permission for the appointment of a king is a concession to man's evil inclination was substantially borrowed from the medieval Christian theologian and exegete Nicholas de Lyra's 'Postilla'.<sup>492</sup> The identical notion already appears in the Babylonian Talmud, in connection with the pentateuchal law permitting an Israelite soldier engaged in warfare to have sexual relations with, and subsequently marry, a captive Gentile woman seen by him.<sup>493</sup> It is far more likely that de Lyra, who

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid.118.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.116, citing Menasseh b. Israel: *Conciliador* (Frankfurt, 1633) 227.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.121.

<sup>493</sup> See Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin 21b, interpreting Deuteronomy 21:11.

translated Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch into Latin and was thus familiar with rabbinic literature, actually borrowed it from the ancient rabbis.

More generally, Strauss asserts that Christian sources display a far more anti-monarchical trend than Jewish ones, based on theocratic assumptions, and that 'the immediate origin of Abrabanel's anti-monarchist conclusions from his theocratic premises has to be sought... not in Jewish, but in Christian sources'.<sup>494</sup> In support of this view, he cites the 'Glossa Interlinearis; and 'Glossa Ordinaria' to the Vulgate, the Postilla and Paul of Burgos's 'Additiones' thereto. However, Strauss is somewhat self-contradictory here, having already stated that it was from Scripture alone that Abrabanel sought guidance on this issue. Having available the original Hebrew text of Deuteronomy, he would hardly have needed to rely upon the Latin Vulgate, or even less, its glosses. Moreover, whilst certainly acquainted with de Lyra's works, as he cites them several times, he scarcely needed de Lyra to inform him of an idea appearing in the Babylonian Talmud (from where de Lyra himself, via Rashi, probably ultimately derived it). Regarding Paul of Burgos, Strauss has evidently overlooked the fact that Abrabanel mentions him, in his commentary to I Samuel 8, as espousing an essentially pro-monarchic view, which he himself rejects.<sup>495</sup> The mere fact that Abrabanel's view is in substance identical to that 'implied in the Vulgate' is no proof that Abrabanel derived it from there.

Further on this issue of potential Christian influence, Strauss compares Abrabanel's view that a king is not only unnecessary, but harmful for a political community, and that the origin of kingdoms is not the monarch's free election by the people, but force

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<sup>494</sup> Strauss: On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching, 123.

<sup>495</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 204-205.

and violence, with John of Salisbury's 'Policraticus'.<sup>496</sup> But it is dubious whether Abrabanel had read John of Salisbury – certainly Strauss adduces no evidence for this – and thus his direct influence is unlikely. In any event, as Netanyahu notes, John of Salisbury, despite entertaining some strong anti-monarchical sentiments, remained fundamentally pro-monarchist in orientation.<sup>497</sup> In fairness to Strauss, he does not expressly claim direct influence, but merely points to a close resemblance between John of Salisbury's and Abrabanel's respective ideas.

Strauss does, however, perceptively observe that Abrabanel was influenced by humanistic thinking.<sup>498</sup> It is not so much that humanist writers had expressed anti-monarchical opinions – Netanyahu has, controversially, argued that they did not<sup>499</sup> – but rather that, as Strauss neatly puts it:

'Humanism means going back from the tradition to the sources of the tradition. The sources are not (for Abrabanel) so much the historians, poets and orators of classical antiquity, but the literal sense of the Bible...'.<sup>500</sup> He astutely asserts further: 'Abrabanel's teaching tends to be more of a biblical than of a traditionalist character'.<sup>501</sup>

He additionally contends, somewhat more controversially, that Abrabanel was influenced in his permissive view of monarchy by the ancient Roman-Jewish historian

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<sup>496</sup> Strauss: On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency, 114, citing John of Salisbury: *Policraticus*, lib.IV, cap.11.

<sup>497</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 180.

<sup>498</sup> Strauss: On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency, 127.

<sup>499</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 183-184.

<sup>500</sup> Strauss: On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency, 127.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.124.

Josephus. Whilst Josephus does admittedly espouse a permissive stance,<sup>502</sup> maintaining that aristocracy is the best form of government for Israel, and whilst the humanists certainly utilised him as a source for ancient Jewish history, and Abrabanel himself cites him frequently (in the medieval Hebrew abridgement ‘Josippon’), there is nonetheless no evidence that he relied upon him in this instance. Abrabanel significantly fails to cite Josephus here, and it is thus possible that their similarity of stance is purely coincidental.

The issue of humanism conveniently leads us to a consideration of the position of Strauss’s contemporary, Baer, who claims that Abrabanel’s anti-monarchism is attributable to humanist influence. ‘The humanist’, he declares, ‘is also a sworn republican’.<sup>503</sup> Although admittedly there were several Florentine and Venetian humanist republicans,<sup>504</sup> Baer glosses over the fact that at least an equal number of humanists were pro-monarchical.<sup>505</sup> J.H. Bentley indeed points out that ‘humanism in 15<sup>th</sup> century Naples began by reflecting the taste, the interests and the needs of King Alfonso, though it inevitably acquired distinctive characteristics as individual humanists encountered the problems and pressures of a particular society’.<sup>506</sup> Hence, though it is true, as Mario Santoro (cited approvingly by Bentley) contends that, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the humanists’ works affected not only the monarchs’ interests but also the problems of the entire realm, there is no suggestion of any

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<sup>502</sup> Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. W.Whiston (Peabody, Mass., 1992) IV: 8, 17.

<sup>503</sup> Baer: *Toledot*, 256.

<sup>504</sup> E.g. the Florentine Chancellor C. Salutati; also Bruni, Palmieri, Porcari & George of Trebizond. See J. Najemy: ‘Republicanism’ in: *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* 5, ed. P.F.Grendler (N.Y.1999) 315-317.

<sup>505</sup> E.g. Erasmus, Machiavelli, Giovanni Pontano (Head of the Neapolitan Humanist Academy).

<sup>506</sup> J.H. Bentley: *Politics and Culture in Renaissance Naples* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 1988) 41, 43, citing M. Santoro: ‘la cultura umanistica’, in: *Storia di Napoli*, 7, 115-291.

tendency towards republicanism there.<sup>507</sup> He also ignores both Abrabanel's total failure to cite any humanist thinkers throughout his extensive discussion on the ideal constitution of a state, and his emphatic appeal to Scripture itself in support of his anti-monarchical stance. Accordingly, Baer's view is hard to sustain.

The next major authority to tackle the question of the origins of Abrabanel's anti-monarchism is his chief biographer, Netanyahu. His basic thesis is threefold. First, in his elaborate survey of classical and medieval Christian authorities dealing with monarchy as an institution, he shows that, subject to certain qualifications, they were all fundamentally pro-monarchical; hence Abrabanel's anti-monarchy stance could not have been derived from them.<sup>508</sup> Likewise, as rabbinic tradition, as recorded in the Talmud and subsequently codified by Maimonides, was also pro-monarchical, he was unable to rely upon this either. Netanyahu additionally discounts the possibility of any contemporary humanist influences upon Abrabanel's thinking, as he claims that Abrabanel was not a humanist and that in any case the foremost contemporary humanist thinkers were essentially monarchists.<sup>509</sup> He accordingly concludes that Abrabanel's unique position among both Jewish and Christian medieval thinkers on this issue was based on the premise that, by desiring an earthly king, the Israelites had implicitly rejected God as their supreme ruler, a proposition supported by several direct citations from Abrabanel's commentary to Deuteronomy 17 and I Samuel 8. Second, Netanyahu maintains that such interpretations of the biblical texts and the conclusions Abrabanel drew were *not* influenced by adverse personal factors, such as

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<sup>507</sup> E.g. Erasmus, Machiavelli.

<sup>508</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 173-194 & relevant fns.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.183-184. Although, together with most Abrabanel scholars, I reject Netanyahu's view that Abrabanel was not a humanist, the point is academic for the present discussion.

his bitter experiences under the Iberian rulers.<sup>510</sup> Third, he holds that Abrabanel's apparently paradoxical view that, although the existence of a monarch is both inessential and undesirable, it is nonetheless unlawful to assassinate or depose even a tyrannical ruler, contradicted mainstream classical and medieval thought.<sup>511</sup> In my analysis of Netanyahu's thesis, I shall examine these three propositions in turn in an attempt to ascertain their accuracy.

## 2. Abrabanel's Basic Attitude to Monarchy

### 2.1 Netanyahu's Thesis

As Netanyahu notes, Abrabanel poses the cardinal question at the commencement of his discussion of the subject in his commentary to Deut. 17:14: '*Is a king essential for the state, or can it exist without him?*'<sup>512</sup> Abrabanel declares that although the conventional opinion of the political philosophers on this issue is that the king is essential, as representing unity, continuity and absolute power, he personally disagrees, both on theoretical grounds and on the basis of objective political experience. Netanyahu, in his relevant primary text and footnotes, cites Dante,<sup>513</sup> Plato,<sup>514</sup> Aristotle,<sup>515</sup> Seneca<sup>516</sup> and the leading Christian theologians Augustine,<sup>517</sup> Isidore of Seville,<sup>518</sup> Aquinas,<sup>519</sup> Wycliffe<sup>520</sup> and Ockham<sup>521</sup> as substantially proponents of the conventional, pro-monarchic, view.

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid. 185-186.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid. 173.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid. 180 & 310 fn.140, citing Dante: *De Monarchia* I, 7.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid. 184 & 312 fn.153, citing Plato: *Republic* I.14, 35; V.473; IX.580; also Laws, III. 694, 695.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid. 176 & 309 fn.112, citing Aristotle: *Politics*, III, ix 4.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid. 184-185 & 312 fn.156, citing Seneca: *De Clementia*, I, 2.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid. 180, & 310 fn.136, citing Augustine: *City of God* V.19, 24, 25-26.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 180.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid. 308 fn.92: 'For Wycliffe as for Ockham the necessity of unity in the state is the main proof of the excellence of monarchy' (J.N.Figgis: *The Divine Right of Kings* [Cambridge, 1934] 69.)

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

He further reminds us that Abrabanel had read the works of most of these thinkers, yet was plainly not influenced by them on the fundamental issue of whether a king is essential for the state.<sup>522</sup> He acknowledges merely that Abrabanel was influenced by Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca in respect of his conception of what a ‘proper king’ should be, essentially a moral superman.<sup>523</sup>

## 2.2 My Critique of Netanyahu’s Thesis

2.2.1 I believe Netanyahu’s first proposition is essentially correct. He is indeed entitled to rely on Abrabanel’s explicit statements that *‘Israel, by appointing a king, rejected God, Israel’s one and only King’ and ‘Israel, whose King is God, Who fights their wars and establishes their laws, has no need of a king’*.<sup>524</sup> However, it would appear that he significantly understates his own case. For Abrabanel could draw support for his anti-monarchical stance not only from Deuteronomy 17 and I Samuel 8, but also from several other important biblical passages not cited by Netanyahu. There is, first, the case of Gideon, an Israelite judge, who, after defeating the Midianites in battle, was invited by the people to become their hereditary monarch, a position which he declined on the grounds that ‘The Lord shall rule over you’.<sup>525</sup> On this verse Abrabanel pertinently remarks:

*‘For kingship and sovereignty are not appropriate for a mortal man, for how can he (legitimately) rule over those more righteous and better than he, and how can he*

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<sup>522</sup> All except Dante, Cicero, Wycliffe and Ockham are actually cited by him in his exegetical writings.

<sup>523</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 177.

<sup>524</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 166,167.

<sup>525</sup> Judges 8: 22-23.

*reign, when tomorrow he shall perish? But it is fitting for the Lord... for He is the Supreme God, living and enduring forever!*<sup>526</sup>

Next, there is the case of the three-year tyrannical rule of Gideon's illegitimate son Abimelekh, which culminated in disaster, as recounted in detail in Judges 9. Abrabanel must have drawn the lesson from this sorry episode of the perils associated with kingship.

Moreover, reference is made, in Judges 18:7, to a city named La'ish, whose population is there described as 'a people dwelling securely after the manner of the Sidonians, quietly and confidently...' Abrabanel's comment here is illuminating:

*'... I think that the Sidonians were merchantmen who invariably conducted their affairs in good ways without a king, as do the Venetians, the Florentines and the Genoese, and the other peoples in... Italy to this day – retaining their (ancient) customs without a king reigning over them...' <sup>527</sup>*

This constitutes Abrabanel's biblical proof that a republican constitution works perfectly well, and that a king is unnecessary for the smooth running of daily affairs. He utilises the contemporary examples of the republican Italian city-states merely to illustrate the veracity of Scripture.

Furthermore, Abrabanel makes much of a poignant verse in Hosea, where the prophet proclaims in God's name: 'I shall give you a king in My anger and... take him away

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<sup>526</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Judges, 121.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid. 147.

in My wrath'.<sup>528</sup> Invoking the context of the surrounding verses, he remarks: '*You, Israel, destroyed yourself by requesting a king, for your help lay in Me and not in a king*'.<sup>529</sup>

Finally, although Netanyahu lengthily discusses Abrabanel's comments on I Samuel 8:4, he strangely omits any reference to the prophet's address to the people in I Samuel 12, where he alleges that they had displayed a lack of trust in God by clamouring for an earthly ruler when threatened by invasion from the Ammonites - 'But the Lord your God is your King!'<sup>530</sup> This is precisely Abrabanel's own thesis. It is only because of the extraordinarily strong expressions employed in the biblical text, here and elsewhere, that Abrabanel felt fully justified in ignoring the cumulative weight of hallowed rabbinic tradition.

### 2.2.2 Potential Influence of Personal Factors

Let us now examine Netanyahu's second proposition, that Abrabanel's personal experiences in his relationship with particular monarchs did not adversely influence him against monarchy as an institution. Netanyahu writes:

'While it must be remembered that Abrabanel's first attack upon monarchism, that which we find in his commentary on I Samuel, was written after his escape from Portugal – where a death sentence was issued against him by Joao II – it can hardly be

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<sup>528</sup> Hosea 13:11.

<sup>529</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 166.

<sup>530</sup> I Samuel 12:12.

assumed that this incident would have completely erased the long period of glory and prosperity which he had enjoyed under the reign of Alfonso V.<sup>531</sup>

Here Netanyahu apparently displays a lack of psychological insight. The trauma he had so recently experienced as a result of Joao's manifestly unjust conduct was still uppermost in his mind. He certainly did not forget the kindness of Alfonso, upon whom he indeed lavishes fulsome praise in the introduction to his *Commentary to Joshua*,<sup>532</sup> but equally he despised Joao, whom he explicitly execrates.<sup>533</sup> The extreme contrast between the two merely demonstrated that the problem with monarchy was that its success, from the people's perspective, depended entirely on the *personal character* of the individual ruler occupying the throne.

Netanyahu also observes that Abrabanel's statement on kingship was incorporated in his commentary to Deuteronomy, although in the meantime he had served Ferdinand of Spain, and Ferrante and Alfonso of Naples.<sup>534</sup> Again, this proposition is disputable on the grounds that Abrabanel had initially composed his commentary to Deuteronomy whilst still in Portugal, merely revising it many years later, when resident in Venice. It is thus conceivable that, due to work pressures, he left this aspect of his commentary untouched. It is further arguable that he displayed personal loyalty to Ferrante and Alfonso because they had treated him and the other Spanish exiles well. Moreover, he felt it vital to be in an influential position, where he could sway the ruler in his co-religionists' favour, as when he persuaded Ferrante to admit

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<sup>531</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 185.

<sup>532</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to *Commentary to Joshua*, 2.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

<sup>534</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 185.

Jews into Naples despite their being likely plague-carriers.<sup>535</sup> But merely because some rulers were benign, that did not suffice to alter Abrabanel's negative view on monarchy as an institution. Certainly, judging the matter from a Jewish perspective, the number of evil rulers had far exceeded the good ones.

Netanyahu proceeds to claim that 'it is difficult to discern anywhere in Abravanel's writings any personal animosity towards Ferdinand, despite the latter's role in the expulsion of the Jews from Spain'.<sup>536</sup> However, Netanyahu overlooks Abrabanel's clear statement in the introduction to his Commentary to Kings that, despite the fervent pleas of himself and his friends at court, the king '*stopped up his ears like a deaf adder; he would not relent despite everything'; and the queen (Isabella) standing at his right hand persuaded him with her abundance of words to finalise his act*'.<sup>537</sup> This is hardly a complimentary reference to the Sovereigns. Moreover, he ignores the even bitterer remarks made about Ferdinand<sup>538</sup> in the uncensored, Sabbionetta edition of Abrabanel's commentary to Deuteronomy,<sup>539</sup> where he also refers scathingly to Charles VIII of France, who had invaded Naples, forcing Abrabanel to flee for safety, with the concomitant loss of his home and all his material possessions.<sup>540</sup>

### 2.2.3 Qualified Endorsement of Netanyahu's Stance

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid.64-65.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.185-186.

<sup>537</sup> Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Kings, 422.

<sup>538</sup> He refers to Ferdinand as Ashmodai, legendary demon king. See Babylonian Talmud: Gittin 68a.

<sup>539</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy (Sabbionetta, 1551).

<sup>540</sup> He depicts Charles VIII as 'a fly', a description lifted from Isaiah 7:18: '*On that day the Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt...*', a metaphor for the swiftness of movement of the Egyptian armies that God was sending to attack Judah.

Abrabanel fittingly applied this description to the destructive French hordes descending upon the Italian Peninsula. A fly additionally conjures up an image of unpleasantness and filth.

It should not be assumed that, because of my criticisms of Netanyahu's views on the role of the *personal* factor in Abrabanel's stance towards monarchy, I oppose his main thesis, that what overwhelmingly dominated Abrabanel's thought on this issue was what he read in Scripture and the way he interpreted it. On the contrary, I entirely share his view that Abrabanel's starting point on this, as on many other matters, was invariably the Divine word. However, precisely because he believed so ardently in the relevance of biblical events to contemporary life, he automatically – perhaps subconsciously – regarded the unfolding of the major political events of his day as apt illustrations of the biblical message. He would thus have regarded rulers such as Joao of Portugal, and the Spanish Sovereigns, as modern-day versions of the ancient Pharaohs. It was only natural for him to have been swayed by the conduct of contemporary rulers towards the Jews, whom he believed had a pivotal role to play in human history. However, had he found within the Bible (regardless of later rabbinic glosses) an *unequivocal* endorsement of monarchy as an institution, I contend that he would never intentionally have distorted the text's plain meaning to suit his personal predilections.

A significant caveat must nonetheless be entered here. Notwithstanding the anti-monarchical sentiments expressed by Samuel and the other supporting precedents from the Book of Judges cited above, Abrabanel could hardly have failed to note, in his overall survey of biblical history, the various incidents of lawlessness recorded as occurring under the Judges' rule, when 'every man did what was right in his own sight'.<sup>541</sup> Nor could he have ignored, *per contra*, the examples of the righteous Judean rulers, Hezekiah and Josiah, let alone the glorious era of David and Solomon, when,

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<sup>541</sup> Judges 21:25.

according to the Bible, Israel was at the zenith of its power and glory. Confronted with conflicting scriptural evidence, Abrabanel understandably resolved his dilemma by choosing to highlight those passages most consistent with his own life experiences, whilst glossing over, or explaining away, the remainder. Moreover, as Netanyahu himself points out, Abrabanel drew an important distinction between the Davidic monarchy, endorsed by explicit Divine mandate through the medium of Samuel, and his prophetic successors Nathan and Gad, on the one hand, and illegitimate, self-appointed rulers (both Jewish and Gentile) on the other.<sup>542</sup> The method employed by Abrabanel to deal with the phenomenon of the Davidic monarchy was twofold. First, he asserted that, although the people should never have requested a king at all, once they had done so and acknowledged the need for endorsement of his election by Divine mandate, on the basis that he would rule entirely in accordance with the Torah, God endorsed the monarchical institution – and both David and his son and successor Solomon were manifestly righteous men.<sup>543</sup> Second, Abrabanel, contrary to Maimonides,<sup>544</sup> invested David and Solomon with *prophetic or quasi-prophetic* status, thereby elevating them above ordinary rulers, and effectively turning them into heads of a Divine government.<sup>545</sup>

### 3. Is Deposition of Tyrannical Tutors Lawful?

#### 3.1 Netanyahu's Thesis

This, the third important issue in this context, is one upon which Netanyahu elaborates. Indisputably, Abrabanel, notwithstanding his general anti-monarchic

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<sup>542</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 192.

<sup>543</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 209.

<sup>544</sup> Maimonides: Guide, 264.

<sup>545</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 192; Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 400 (stating that David was invested with the Holy Spirit); Commentary to Kings, 461-465 (stating that Solomon attained prophetic status on four occasions). Abrabanel also cites Seder Olam (see Rashi to Babylonian Talmud: Megillah 14a) in support.

stance, opposed the deposition or assassination of a tyrannical ruler under any circumstances. He makes this abundantly clear in his commentary to Deuteronomy 17:14, a crucial passage justifiably relied upon by Netanyahu; and lest it be assumed that this prohibition against rebellion applied only to Jewish kings, he adds, for good measure, that he had discussed this very issue with '*kings and their wise men*'.<sup>546</sup> In context, this must refer to the time when his Portuguese aristocratic friends had sought to involve him in their conspiracy against Joao. Thus he extended the prohibition to Gentile rulers, since they too had been allowed to reign by Divine will.

Netanyahu proceeds to argue, and demonstrate, that this unqualified opposition to rebellion against an unjust ruler ran counter to the views of virtually all the leading classical and medieval political theorists, who, despite their endorsement of monarchy in principle, drew the Aristotelian distinction between kings and tyrants, and claimed that while the king was indeed a representative of God, the tyrant represented the devil. He cites Cicero,<sup>547</sup> Plutarch,<sup>548</sup> John of Salisbury,<sup>549</sup> Ockham<sup>550</sup> and Aquinas as proponents of this view. Thus he represents Abrabanel's opposing view as virtually unique in his day.<sup>551</sup> Furthermore, although Netanyahu does not allude to this, Abrabanel himself declares that he could find no opinion expressed on this crucial question throughout rabbinic literature.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 186; Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 170-171.

<sup>547</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 187.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. & 313 fn.170, citing John of Salisbury: Polycraticus, VIII, 20.

<sup>550</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 187 & 313 fn. 171, citing Ockham: Dialogue, II, p.924m,i.60.

<sup>551</sup> Notably, however, a generation later, the founders of Protestantism, Luther and Calvin, espoused the same view as did Abrabanel.

<sup>552</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 170.

It is hard to quarrel in principle with this conclusion, which serves to prove Abrabanel's independence of thought and eclecticism, a characteristic of his on which we have had occasion to remark elsewhere. For sure, Netanyahu does not rely upon Abrabanel's comments on Deuteronomy 17:14 as the sole biblical source for his 'anti-rebellion' stance. He also mentions his comments to Joshua 10:1 (the capitulation of the Gibeonites, a section of the Canaanite nation, to Joshua, which effectively constituted rebellion against their own rulers),<sup>553</sup> to I Samuel 24:7 (David's refusal to assassinate Saul when he had him in his power),<sup>554</sup> to I Samuel 29:5 (David's conduct in relation to Achish, king of Gath, who had afforded him protection against Saul),<sup>555</sup> and to II Samuel 1:14 (David's execution of the Amalekite slave who claimed to have killed Saul).<sup>556</sup>

### 3.2 My Critique

Here again, I believe that Netanyahu has *significantly understated, or misrepresented*, his case for Abrabanel's sole reliance upon Scripture. Most of the examples he selects in support of his thesis are not compelling, as it is arguable that David deliberately conducted himself respectfully towards Saul for political reasons, so that his own sovereignty should, in due course, be treated with similar deference. Similarly, the instance he cites from Joshua of the Gibeonite capitulation to Israel being a treacherous act is inconclusive. Abrabanel explains that this was how their conduct appeared from the Canaanite chieftains' perspective – he is non-committal as to whether such conduct was, objectively, morally justifiable.<sup>557</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Netanyahu, Abravanel, 312 fn.165.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Joshua, 51.

I shall presently show that Abrabanel had available far stronger biblical precedents on which to rely than those invoked by Netanyahu, which he actually utilised in his relevant exegesis. For in all cases recorded in the Book of Kings where an evil ruler was assassinated or deposed and the author approves this, the ruler's deposition is stated to have had the explicit sanction of a prophet reflecting the Divine will. The best-known instances are those of Jeroboam's revolt against Solomon's son, Rehoboam, resulting in the secession of ten of the twelve Israelite tribes and the formation of a separate kingdom,<sup>558</sup> an action sanctioned by the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite,<sup>559</sup> and Jehu's assassination of Jehoram, Ahab's wicked son, and the wholesale extirpation of Ahab's dynasty,<sup>560</sup> sanctioned by the prophet Elisha.<sup>561</sup> By contrast, wherever there had been no prophetic endorsement of a usurpation, its occurrence is merely recorded laconically; sometimes the new ruler is also subsequently condemned as having 'done evil in the sight of the Lord'.<sup>562</sup>

However, the most pertinent instance for our purposes is that of the extirpation of Jeroboam's dynasty by Baasha (sanctioned by Ahijah the Shilonite in I Kings 14:14) and the subsequent wholesale condemnation, in turn, by the prophet Jehu son of Hanani, of Baasha and his dynasty and his approval of its annihilation.<sup>563</sup> In this case,

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<sup>558</sup> This source was actually used by Christian writers wishing to justify the overthrow of a tyrannical ruler, see Strauss 'On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency', 115; but Abrabanel insists that, for such deposition to be legitimate, there must be explicit prophetic sanction, e.g. that of Ahijah the Shilonite here.

<sup>559</sup> I Kings 11:29-39 & 12:1-20.

<sup>560</sup> II Kings 9:23 & 10:17

<sup>561</sup> Ibid. 9:1-10.

<sup>562</sup> See II Kings 15 for various relevant instances.

<sup>563</sup> I Kings 16:1-4.

Jehu condemns Baasha not only for having acted as wickedly as Jeroboam, but ‘*also for having slain him*’.<sup>564</sup>

Abrabanel’s comments on this passage are most enlightening. In his sixth question on I Kings 15 & 16, he queries why Baasha’s assassination of Jeroboam’s wicked son Nadab was accounted a sin, as Ahijah had issued an unequivocal condemnation of Jeroboam’s dynasty and prophesied its overthrow.<sup>565</sup> He explains:

(13) *The commentators have stated... that, although he (Nadab) was evil, Baasha was (still) punished, because he was evil like him, and because Baasha did not put him to death to fulfil the word of the prophet... but out of the wickedness of his heart, to be able to reign in his stead... however, it seems to me that, when Baasha slew all Jeroboam’s dynasty, he said he was doing so as Jeroboam had served idols and angered the Lord, and... to fulfil the prophet’s words – so when he too... did evil, the prophet condemned him for it; and that is the meaning of (the phrase) ‘and because he slew him’... for how could Baasha have destroyed Jeroboam’s house on account of something of which he was himself guilty?*<sup>566</sup>

It is clear from the above that regicide is justifiable only when sanctioned by a prophet, and carried out specifically with intent to implement the prophet’s word.

It is further significant that Zimri, the man who later actually assassinated Baasha’s son, Elah, was not selected by the people as his successor (presumably because, as

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid.16:7.

<sup>565</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 568.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid. 572.

Elah's servant, and lacking a specific prophetic mandate, he was regarded as having betrayed his master).<sup>567</sup> Accordingly they selected the chief general, Omri, to rule instead.<sup>568</sup> Here again, Abrabanel's remarks reflect his trend of thought:

*'Scripture states that "the earth shakes with fury on account of a slave who comes to power",<sup>569</sup> and on account of the treason (committed by) Zimri against his master; and they (accordingly) appointed Omri, the chief general, king; and it appears that his appointment... was on the condition that he would avenge King Elah('s murder) at the hand of Zimri his slave...'.*<sup>570</sup>

Another significant passage in this connection occurs in Abrabanel's commentary to II Kings 9, where he discusses the justification for Jehu's usurpation of the Israelite throne and extirpation of Ahab's entire dynasty. He states that the prophet Elisha initially intimated to Jehu, by the words: 'I have anointed you ruler over the nation of the Lord, over Israel',<sup>571</sup> that '*he should extirpate all the idol-worshippers, for he was anointed as king solely for (the benefit of) those who feared the Lord...*'; and that by the words '... You shall smite the house of Ahab your master',<sup>572</sup> he intimated to him that '*he should not think that, by this act, he was doing a shameful thing insofar as Ahab had been his master; for the Almighty had commanded this, and "one who observes a Divine precept shall know no evil thing"*'...<sup>573</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> See II Kings 9:31.

<sup>568</sup> I Kings 16:16.

<sup>569</sup> Proverbs 30:21&22.

<sup>570</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 572.

<sup>571</sup> II Kings 9:3.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid. 9:7.

<sup>573</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 630. Here Abrabanel cites Ecclesiastes (8:5) to support his argument.

The Book of Kings records several further incidents of assassinations of a succession of notably evil rulers in the exceedingly unstable Northern Kingdom. In II Kings 15, we are told of a King Shallum who assassinated his predecessor Zechariah, and whose own reign lasted for just one month before he in turn was slain by another usurper, Menahem. Abrabanel here observes: '*He (Shallum) reigned for only one month, as he was punished measure for measure; he slew Zechariah, so Menahem slew him*'.<sup>574</sup> Likewise, Abrabanel, commenting on the subsequent assassination of Menahem's son Pekahiah, recorded in the same chapter, declares: '*And this was Divine punishment, for his (Pekahiah's) father Menahem also slew Shallum*'.<sup>575</sup>

It is thus clear from all these cases that deposition of a tyrannical ruler was prohibited unless carried out under explicit prophetic warrant, and that Divine punishment for breach of such prohibition would inevitably follow.

Accordingly, Abrabanel had ample biblical warrant for his emphatic 'anti-rebellion' stance. The ancient rabbinic sages' silence on this issue did not perturb him, as Scripture spoke for itself, and additionally, he had contemporary precedent backing him.

In conclusion, then, Netanyahu's views on Abrabanel's stance towards monarchy, with all its ramifications, are essentially correct, though he significantly *understates* the strength of the biblical authority and further fails to accord sufficient weight to Abrabanel's personal experiences and, in lesser measure, also to the way in which contemporary polities were governed. Abrabanel had, after all, seen how well the

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid. 644.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

Italian city-republics functioned in practice – having witnessed the Venetian government at first hand – and goes out of his way several times in his exegetical writings to extol the virtues of these republican constitutions and their administration. He even found biblical warrant for the basis of the Venetian constitution – with its various Councils of One Thousand, Two Hundred, Forty and Ten - in the judicial system promulgated by Exodus 18:21 & 25.<sup>576</sup>

#### 4. Analysis of Other Scholars' Views

4.1 Abraham Melamed, in his essay ‘The Attitude Towards Democracy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy’, starts from the fairly uncontroversial premise that medieval Jewish thought was primarily monarchist and anti-democratic, and appears substantially to agree with Netanyahu’s conclusions. He writes:

‘Even Abravanel, for all his clear anti-monarchic tendencies, showed democratic or republican, tendencies only to a very limited degree. His antimonarchism was not the consequence of any liberal tendencies, but rather of his professed theocratic views’.<sup>577</sup>

However, whilst it is true that Abrabanel’s *ideal* governmental system was theocratic, it seems clear from all the relevant citations above that he vastly preferred republican, or, more precisely, oligarchic, government to monarchy. He was convinced that the weight of biblical authority favoured government by many over the absolute rule of one individual. He recognised that, in practice, theocracy could not be established until messianic times, and that accordingly republicanism was the best form of

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<sup>576</sup> Idem: Commentary to Exodus, 157.

<sup>577</sup> A. Melamed: ‘The Attitude Towards Democracy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy’ in: Commandment and Community: New Essays in Jewish Legal and Political Philosophy, ed. D. H. Frank (Albany, 1995) 189.

government currently available. His democratic leanings were, according to Melamed, influenced by late medieval scholastic philosophy, based on Aristotle's Politics, his own negative experiences in Iberia and the positive impression made upon him by the Italian republics, though Melamed acknowledges that the primary influence was that of Scripture as interpreted by him. His republican tendency is well illustrated in his commentary on the biblical passages detailing Jethro's advice to Moses as to how the people should be governed, where Abrabanel notes that Moses actually improved on Jethro's advice by injecting a heavier democratic element. This 'democratic tendency' was, however, mitigated by a strong aristocratic flavour. Melamed interestingly observes in this connection that Moses, though granting the Israelites the right to choose officials, kept the final approval of the elected officials in his own hands: 'And I will make them heads over you' (Deut.1:13). I would add that Abrabanel was unimpressed by limited, or constitutional, monarchy either, as he indicates in a passing reference to the Kingdom of Aragon, where the monarch's powers were to some degree legally constrained.<sup>578</sup>

Melamed's overall thesis appears uncontroversial, besides his contention that Abrabanel was partially influenced in his republican tendencies by medieval scholastic philosophy, a proposition denied by Netanyahu.

4.2 Reuven Kimelman, in his essay entitled 'Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos', advances the extremely radical view that Republicanism is, *pace* Maimonides, an integral part of Jewish tradition, and that accordingly Abrabanel's anti-monarchical

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<sup>578</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 206.

stance was not especially revolutionary.<sup>579</sup> He cites Saadia, Ibn Ezra,<sup>580</sup> Sforno<sup>581</sup> and D.Z. Hoffmann on Deuteronomy 17:14 for the view that monarchy is optional or concessive. He then quotes another contemporary scholar, Ravitsky, as claiming that Abrabanel's antimonarchism was due to the influence of Nissim Gerondi ('Ran'), who advocated the separation of judicial from monarchic powers.<sup>582</sup> However, as Kimelman correctly observes, Gerondi's position *per se* explains little of Abrabanel's far more fundamental antimonarchical stance, and it should further be noted that Kimelman himself, later in his essay, actually lists Gerondi amongst those in favour of monarchy as being divinely mandated!<sup>583</sup>

Of the four traditional commentators invoked by Kimelman in support of Abrabanel's stance, only Saadia and Ibn Ezra are really relevant, as they preceded Abrabanel and could thus conceivably have influenced him. (Sforno may have taken his cue from Abrabanel on this issue, though there is no evidence for this.) Furthermore, Netanyahu actually lists Saadia amongst the pro-monarchs!<sup>584</sup> Accordingly, it seems that Ibn Ezra is the only medieval source upon whom Abrabanel could have effectively relied, which substantially weakens Kimelman's argument.

Furthermore, it is significant in this connection that the renowned 16th century Sephardi *halakhist* and biblical exegete Moses Alsheikh ('Alshich') protests vehemently, in his own commentary to Deuteronomy 17, at Abrabanel's repudiation of the explicit teaching of the Talmudic Sages and all the later 'Decisors' that the

<sup>579</sup> R. Kimelman: 'Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos' in: Commandment and Community, 200.

<sup>580</sup> Ibn Ezra: Commentary to the Pentateuch 3, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1977) 267.

<sup>581</sup> O. Sforno: Commentary to the Pentateuch, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1984) 337.

<sup>582</sup> A. Ravitsky: Religion and State in Jewish Philosophy (Israel Democracy Institute, 2002) 85-121.

<sup>583</sup> Kimelman: Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos, 200.

<sup>584</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 311, fn.145, citing Saadia: Emunot ve-De'ot, X, 9.

appointment of a king was a Divine command.<sup>585</sup> This shows how radical Abrabanel's view was, from the *halakhic* perspective, further undermining Kimelman's thesis.

We may conveniently summarise Kimelman's chief remaining arguments here, and then subject them to close analysis. First, he contends that the biblical tradition is ambivalent, oscillating between pro and anti-monarchism, and that Abrabanel has numerous modern-day followers in his interpretation of I Samuel 8. He also points to R. Nehorai's essentially anti-monarchical view in the *Sifre* and Babylonian Talmud, and claims that Maimonides deviated here from the normal rules of codification that would have decided in his favour. Finally, he cites a Midrash supporting the anti-monarchical view, which declares that the Jewish people will eventually recall the era of the biblical monarchy, lamenting all the national calamities for which numerous particular rulers were responsible. They will, accordingly, ultimately acknowledge that they need no earthly ruler, and ask God alone to reign over them.<sup>586</sup>

On analysis, whilst the biblical sources are admittedly ambivalent, the *rabbinic* sources are virtually unanimous. It is also true that Abrabanel invoked R. Nehorai's view in support of his position, but it is most doubtful whether Maimonides deviated from the normal codification rules by preferring R. Judah's view to his. For R. Nehorai, according to one opinion in the Talmud, is identical with R. Meir,<sup>587</sup> and generally, wherever R. Meir is in conflict with R. Judah, the latter's view prevails.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Alshich: *Torat Moshe* 2 (Jerusalem, 2009) 1464-1465.

<sup>586</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah, ed. Romm (Vilna, 1909) 5:11, 221.

<sup>587</sup> Babylonian Talmud: *Eruvin* 13b.

<sup>588</sup> See Samuel ha-Nagid: *Abridged Rules of the Talmud: Babylonian Talmud* 1, ed. Pe'er ha-Torah, (Jerusalem, 1967) 46b [92]).

It is surely also significant that Abrabanel himself did not criticise Maimonides for deviation from the norm.

Kimelman's citation of Midrash Rabbah is a valid argument in support of his thesis – indeed, there is yet another passage in Midrash Rabbah, strangely not mentioned by him, which could further strengthen his case<sup>589</sup> – but ultimately it must be acknowledged that the Midrash can never override the Babylonian Talmud in authority.<sup>590</sup> Furthermore, it is arguable that, in context, the particular Midrash invoked by Kimelman alludes to the messianic era.

Kimelman further endorses Melamed's proposition that Abrabanel was only influenced minimally by Christian political thought on the issue of monarchy.<sup>591</sup> But this is really irrelevant, since, as Netanyahu has convincingly demonstrated, all the leading Christian thinkers who opined on this question were actually *pro-monarchical*.

More controversially, Kimelman additionally claims that, in arguing against monarchy, Abrabanel used 'scare tactics' similar to those employed by Samuel himself in the Bible.<sup>592</sup> In other words, he deliberately exaggerated the monarch's absolute power so as to quash the popular desire for monarchy *ab initio*. According to Kimelman, Abrabanel intentionally elevated Gerondi's notion that the monarch wielded 'great authority' into 'absolute authority'.

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<sup>589</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:8, 220.

<sup>590</sup> Nahmanides declared at the Barcelona Disputation that *midrashic* statements are not binding upon Jewry. See also Samuel ha-Nagid: Introduction to Babylonian Talmud 1, ed. Pe'er ha-Torah (Jerusalem, 1967) 45b [90].

<sup>591</sup> Kimelman: Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos, 200.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.199.

It remains a moot point, amongst both traditional Jewish commentators and modern biblical scholars, as to whether Samuel's declaration to the people describing the extent of the powers a potential ruler would possess<sup>593</sup> constituted a genuine statement of the monarch's rights and entitlements under pentateuchal law, or was merely a warning that, once a king was firmly on the throne, he was likely to act illegitimately.<sup>594</sup> But ultimately, the point is of little practical significance, since in either case, the prospect of a monarch possessing such sweeping powers over his subjects was hardly an attractive one. What is indisputable is that Abrabanel himself had directly witnessed how devastating a monarch's absolute power could be when employed for evil purposes. Had he not been forced to flee for his life from his native land in 1483 as a direct consequence of Joao's ill-will, consequentially losing almost his entire fortune? And had he not also seen, years later, in Spain, how utterly powerless both he, as a leading Minister of the Crown, and his wealthy and distinguished Jewish colleagues, had been in obtaining revocation of the Edict of Expulsion? Samuel's anti-monarchical diatribe was, for him, authentic, albeit brutal, prophetic truth.

Accordingly, Kimelman's various contentions and conclusions are rather tenuous and he can hardly be said to have proved his case.

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<sup>593</sup> I Samuel 8:11-18.

<sup>594</sup> The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 20b) records a dispute between R. Jose and R. Judah on this issue. Abrabanel states that Maimonides endorsed R. Jose's view that Samuel was merely pointing out the king's legal rights, whereas his own view accords with R. Judah's, and that a careful reading of the relevant verses clearly supports it.

5. My own view that Abrabanel's antimonarchical stance, albeit ultimately derived from the Bible, was buttressed and confirmed by his own political experience, both on a personal and national level, is shared by G. Veltri, who declares:

'Turning now to Jewish thinkers of the humanistic period, I would mention in this context Isaac Abravanel, whose theory of the republic is a negative reflection of his unsuccessful experience with monarchy: his idealisation of Venice is comprehensible only as a political celebration of a "tolerant" state'.<sup>595</sup>

Abrabanel knew well that the cumulative weight of rabbinic tradition was against him on the issue of Jewish monarchy. (Although he opposed the institution of monarchy *per se*, even amongst the Gentiles, this should not unduly concern us, since, for his exegetical purposes in explicating the crucial passages in Deuteronomy and Samuel, his main thrust related to Israelite monarchy; and, as we have seen, he himself draws a fundamental distinction between Jewish and Gentile monarchies.) All he had unequivocally supporting his own view, within the rabbinic arena, was R. Nehorai's dissenting voice in the Sifre and the Babylonian Talmud, and the single word '*reshut*' ('optional') of the somewhat controversial commentator Ibn Ezra. Against him, as even Kimelman admits, were aligned (*inter alia*) Maimonides,<sup>596</sup> Joseph Bekhor Shor,<sup>597</sup> Menahem Me'iri<sup>598</sup> and Gerondi.<sup>599</sup> (Bekhor Shor's stance is particularly

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<sup>595</sup> G. Veltri: Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity (Leiden, 2009) 195.

<sup>596</sup> Maimonides: Mishneh Torah, I: Sefer ha-Mitzvot (Jerusalem, 1982) 34; VII: Hilkhot Melakhim 1:1, 176.

<sup>597</sup> J. Bekhor Shor: Commentary to the Pentateuch, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1994) 344.

<sup>598</sup> M. Me'iri: Commentary to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, ed. Kedem (Jerusalem, 1971) 70.

<sup>599</sup> Admittedly, Gerondi intimates, concerning the sin of the builders of the Tower of Babel, that their wish to appoint a powerful ruler (Nimrod) over them was *permissible*, thus ostensibly concurring with Abrabanel's own position; but this is in reference to the Gentiles. In Israel's case, Gerondi

significant, as he is generally a thoroughgoing advocate of the ‘*P’shat*’.) To this already daunting list, we may safely add (*inter alia*) Nahmanides, (who, by his silence in his commentary to Maimonides’ ‘Sefer ha-Mitzvot’, effectively endorses Maimonides’ view), the anonymous Sefer ha-Hinukh,<sup>600</sup> and R. Abraham b. David of Posquieres (Maimonides’ greatest *halakhic* critic) who, like Nahmanides, signally fails to protest against Maimonides’ insistence that the appointment of a king is a Divine precept. Moreover, Rashbam (an extreme exponent of ‘*P’shat*’, who would be expected to adopt Ibn Ezra’s radical approach) maintains a discreet silence on the issue in his commentary to Deuteronomy.<sup>601</sup> But Abrabanel was not perturbed by all this, feeling that he was supported by the plain word of Scripture, the truth of which was amply confirmed by personal experience of contemporary European politics, which served as verification of the Divine word.<sup>602</sup> As evident from his works, Abrabanel possessed supreme intellectual self-confidence, and, though writing as a Jew faithful to tradition, did not hesitate to reject it where he felt the need for ultimate truth was paramount. Regarding monarchy, accordingly, he had no qualms about his virtually isolated stance.

## 6. Conclusions

There is no reason to believe that Abrabanel was insincere in his negative views concerning monarchy. His lifetime involvement in politics and association with some of the most powerful sovereigns in Europe, which ostensibly seems to belie this, was,

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insists that the king’s appointment is a positive Divine command.

<sup>600</sup> Sefer ha-Hinukh II, 768–770.

<sup>601</sup> Both Gersonides: Commentary to the Torah, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 2000)V, 147 and Zechariah b. Solomon ha-Rofe: Midrash ha-Hefetz, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1992), II, 405, state unequivocally that appointment of a king is a Divine precept. Only Joseph Ibn Kaspi (Cracow, 1906) 284, seems to support Abrabanel’s position, but does not explicitly state that such appointment is merely permissive. In any event, Abrabanel does not cite him here.

<sup>602</sup> Notably, in his commentary to I Samuel 8:6, Abrabanel cites Aristotle’s aphorism that ‘experience prevails over the syllogism’.

in the best Iberian Jewish tradition, little more than an attempt to alleviate the hardships of his co-religionists through the influence he might be able to exert on their behalf. But his bitter personal experiences led him to the sad conclusion that the biblical warnings against abuse of absolute royal power were all too relevant and justified. And for him, the word of Scripture, which highlighted all too clearly the dangers associated with monarchy, rather than the ideas of humanists, ancient Greek philosophers or medieval Christian scholastics, was paramount. Insofar as humanism is concerned, we have already seen that though some Renaissance humanists were republicans, Abrabanel evinces no definite signs of their influence upon him. Even the force of rabbinic tradition, which he generally venerated greatly, and which, *pace* Kimelman, was overwhelmingly pro-monarchical, did not suffice in this instance to deflect Abrabanel from his innermost convictions.

Republicanism too was not Abrabanel's ideal system of government, not having been divinely ordained. But it was certainly preferable to monarchy, since rule by the many, as opposed to that of a single individual, automatically carried with it the requisite checks and balances needed for the protection of the republic's citizens. Abrabanel lived in Venice for several years, and thus had the opportunity of witnessing at first hand how efficiently this polity, at the time the envy of Europe, functioned on a daily basis. Domenico Morosoni (1417-1509), in his work 'De bene institute republica', outlined Venice as an ideal polity run by a sober and wise gerontocracy devoted to public, not private, utility.<sup>603</sup> It was not for nothing that

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<sup>603</sup> Najemy: 'Republicanism' in: Encyclopedia of the Renaissance 5, ed. P.F. Grendler (N.Y.1999) 320.

Abrabanel repeatedly expressed his unbounded admiration for the Venetian Republic:  
*'Venice, the Mistress! Greatest amongst the nations! Princess among the States!'*<sup>604</sup>

Interestingly, another contemporary rabbinic scholar, Yohanan Alemanno, lavished similar praise on Florence, and, as Abrabanel had done in the case of Venice, purported to trace back to the Bible its model of government. Moreover, Abrabanel was not alone amongst his Jewish contemporaries in extolling the virtues of Venice. Elijah Capsali too asserted that the attraction exerted by Venice upon german emigrants rested on the ‘greatness of Venice and her institutions, as well as on the perfection of her system of justice’.<sup>605</sup>

Abrabanel’s ideal governmental system was a theocracy, where the ruler was appointed by God, through His inspired prophets, and was obliged to conduct himself continuously in accordance with the laws of the Torah. It is clear, from all Abrabanel ever said on the subject, that he regarded the era of the Judges (a period lasting several centuries) as generally favourable for Israel. In practice, however, he must have acknowledged that such a theocratic system could apply to the Jews alone, and was, moreover, only workable in messianic times. A Christian or Islamic theocracy, under which Jews were living, would surely have held no attractions for him.

It followed that, since the ruler was appointed by direct Divine mandate, as in a theocracy, or even came to occupy the throne by indirect Divine providence, as in a

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<sup>604</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 165; Commentary to Samuel, 206. (His description of Venice is adopted from that of Jerusalem in Lamentations 1:1.)

<sup>605</sup> R. Bonfil: Jewish life in Renaissance Italy: Eng. trans. A. Oldcorn (Berkeley, L.A., London, 1991) 164, 180.

standard monarchy, he could likewise be deposed only with Divine sanction. Hence Abrabanel was appalled by the notion that aggrieved subjects could legitimately slay or depose their sovereign, irrespective of the extent of his tyranny. Whilst superficially this stance seems contradictory to his impassioned diatribe against monarchy as an institution, on closer analysis it follows logically, as a corollary to his view that all monarchical systems are either established by direct Divine mandate, or permitted to exist by inexorable Divine providence, that man must submit himself to the Divine Will in this, as in all other matters.

Netanyahu's arguments in resolution of this apparent dichotomy are convincing, and one may safely adopt his general conclusions on Abrabanel's stance towards monarchy, with the important caveat that he substantially *understates or misstates* the case for biblical influence upon him, and also, to some extent, his traumatic personal experiences under the Iberian monarchical regimes.

One may legitimately wonder why neither the Talmud nor any later traditional commentators or *halakhic* authorities had ever addressed this issue of rebellion against a tyrannical ruler. The answer, I believe, must lie in the practicalities of the situation. The manner in which the Gentile nations chose to govern themselves was of little relevance to the Jews, whilst within the Jewish sphere, no king had been acknowledged by the entire nation since the Hasmonean era, i.e. before the destruction of the Temple. It was firmly believed that the next Israelite ruler would be the Messiah, against whose divinely-mandated rule rebellion would effectively be impossible. Abrabanel, however, with his penchant for political philosophy, developed both as a result of humanist influences and, more significantly, of his own

bitter personal experiences, perceived the matter differently, and as more of a live issue.

Abrabanel's stance on monarchy was undoubtedly revolutionary in his day, and Kimelman's contrary view simply cannot be sustained, as demonstrated above.

Strauss seems to me overly keen to attribute Abrabanel's views on monarchy to medieval Christian and humanist sources. I have already shown that the 'medieval Christian' hypothesis is not only factually tenuous, but unnecessary. Baer's insistence upon Abrabanel having been swayed by humanistic republican ideals is likewise, as demonstrated above, an unnecessary hypothesis. However, Strauss is justified in observing that Abrabanel was fundamentally a biblicalist rather than a traditionalist, though this statement must, naturally, be suitably qualified. As will be seen in Chapter 6, Abrabanel vehemently opposed Karaite views on doctrinal matters. On other issues, however, he was relatively flexible in his approach – and monarchy was evidently one of these.

This survey may perhaps be appropriately concluded with an apposite quotation from the contemporary Abrabanel scholar Eric Lawee, to whom we have not referred previously in this chapter, which may be deemed a fair overall assessment:

'In connection with the nature of the ideal Jewish polity, Abrabanel made as substantially and rhetorically powerful a case against monarchy as the Jewish Middle Ages would ever see, in which argumentation grounded in exegesis and reason was

supplemented by Abrabanel's vast knowledge of political regimes past and present'.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Lawee: Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Towards Tradition: Defence, Dissent and Dialogue (Albany, 2001) 38.

## Chapter Five

### Abrabanel's Stance towards Christianity

#### 1. Background

Although Abrabanel's acquaintance with Christian doctrine and practice was intimate and profound, as is evident from his writings, he was hardly unique in this regard amongst his rabbinic predecessors and contemporaries. As early as Talmudic times, we find records of disputations between famous rabbis and learned Christian scholars. On the Christian side, we possess a detailed record of the second century disputation between the early Christian ecclesiastic Justin Martyr and a Jew to whom he refers as 'Tryphon'.<sup>607</sup> In his Introduction to the English version of the Dialogue and other works of Justin Martyr, the editor states that 'the (former) objections to the authenticity of the Dialogue are now regarded as possessing no weight'.<sup>608</sup> Peter Schaefer, in his much more recent work 'Jesus in the Talmud', glosses over the issue, dividing scholars, as to the Dialogue's authenticity, and simply deals with the arguments which Justin attributes to Tryphon.<sup>609</sup> In later centuries, extending into the medieval era, as the Church became increasingly powerful, such disputations, mostly enforced upon the Jews, persisted and became more frequent. Some, like that of Justin Martyr with his Jewish opponent, were conducted relatively amicably, but, as time wore on, the Christian attitude towards their theological opponents turned distinctly more hostile. Leading Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom and Eusebius (in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries) brutally denounced Judaism and the Jewish character and

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<sup>607</sup> Translation of the Writings of the Fathers: Justin Martyr and Athenagoras Vol.2: Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho (Edinburgh, 1897) 85-278.

<sup>608</sup> Trans. of Writings of Fathers: Justin Martyr and Athenagoras: Dialogue (Edinburgh, 1897) 4.

<sup>609</sup> P.Schaefer: Jesus in the Talmud (Princeton, 2007) 99-100, 103-104.

lifestyle. Archbishop Agobard of Lyons' letter against the Jews includes fragments of his disputations with them.<sup>610</sup>

With the growth in the temporal power of the Catholic Church after the Crusades, and certainly from the 13th century onwards, it aimed at extirpating all forms of heresy and enforcing a uniform set of doctrinal beliefs and practices throughout Europe.<sup>611</sup> By then, it had attained the zenith of its spiritual and temporal strength. The Jews, though not formally heretics (as their religion was outside Christianity) nonetheless, by their very existence, constituted an ongoing affront to Christian susceptibilities. Despite the Augustinian doctrine, reiterated by many Popes, that the existence of Jews dispersed throughout Christendom, living in inferior status, constituted ongoing proof of the truth of Christianity,<sup>612</sup> a significant number of rulers, encouraged by the emergent burgher and merchant classes on commercial as well as religious grounds, nonetheless regarded the Jews in their midst as an alien and unwanted presence and accordingly expelled them. There were also occasional instances of genuine fear by influential Churchmen that the skilful public presentation of anti-christian views by outstanding Jewish theologians (e.g. Nahmanides at the disputation of Barcelona – see below) might undermine the simple faith of the Christian masses. The Church indeed considered Jews in the heart of Christian Europe not merely as an alien and unwanted presence, but as a serious threat to the veracity of its doctrine.

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<sup>610</sup> H.H. Ben-Sasson: 'Disputations and Polemics' in: Encyclopedia Judaica 6, ed. C.Roth & G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1972), 83.

<sup>611</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, held under Pope Innocent III's auspices, set the tone for much that followed.

<sup>612</sup> M. Goodman: Rome and Herusalem (London, 2008) 463, 583.

It was within such a hostile environment that the two most famous public disputation of the 13th century occurred, that of Paris (between the learned apostate Nicholas Donin and his Dominican mentors, and R. Yehiel of Paris) in 1240,<sup>613</sup> and that of Barcelona (between the renowned Nahmanides, then the foremost rabbinic authority in Spain, and the apostate Pablo Christiani) in 1263.<sup>614</sup> The Barcelona disputation, as Anna Sapir Abulafia justly observes, broke fresh ground in that, for the first time, the Christian protagonists, paradoxically, invoked the Talmud and Midrash to prove the truth of Christianity; and she further endorses Robert Chazan's view that the Dominicans treated it as a 'practice run', to see what missionary successes they could achieve by such means.<sup>615</sup> Both these disputation, conducted under the respective auspices of the French and the Spanish royal courts, had unpleasant consequences for the Jews. In the immediate aftermath of the Paris disputation, the Talmud and other rabbinic manuscripts were publicly burned in Paris in 1242, an act which, due to the absence of printing, effectively terminated Talmudic scholarship in France. As regards the Barcelona disputation (of which Abrabanel knew, as both Nahmanides and the Dominicans had published official versions of it and he actually mentions it), although the Spanish sovereign had formally commended Nahmanides' performance in the debate, his Dominican foes subsequently agitated so strongly against him that he was compelled to flee the country and emigrate to Palestine.

During 1414-1415, there had been held the Disputation of Tortosa, forced upon the Jews by papal edict, in which many leading Jewish scholars of Spain, including the

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<sup>613</sup> H. Maccoby: *Judaism on Trial: Jewish Christian Disputations in the Middle ages* (E. Brunswick, N.J., London, Toronto, 1982) 19-38; 153-157.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid. 39-80; 97-150. See also Kitvei Ramban I: 'The Disputation of Nahmanides' (Jerusalem, 1964) 302-320.

<sup>615</sup> A.S. Abulafia: *Christian Jewish relations 1000-1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom* (Abingdon, Oxon. and N.Y., 2011).

renowned philosopher Joseph Albo, participated.<sup>616</sup> Presided over by the anti- Pope Benedict XIII in person, it was conducted on a massive scale, with a vast array of Christian theologians to match the Jewish protagonists, and in an atmosphere of intense hostility towards the Jewish representatives, who were kept separated from their families for about eighteen months. It was a most traumatic experience for the Jews, who were refused freedom of speech throughout the proceedings, and emerged utterly humiliated, although, according to Maccoby, the delegates occasionally displayed considerable courage and intellectual acumen.<sup>617</sup> Baer is even more fulsome in his praise of the delegates, stating that they performed their task ‘with exemplary perseverance and steadfastness’ and that ‘their rebuttals were distinguished by their lofty ethical and scholarly level’.<sup>618</sup> He duly notes that Abrabanel considered the Jewish responses feeble, but points out that he had not read the written accounts, relying purely on hearsay.<sup>619</sup> The earliest full account of the Tortosa Disputation is that of Solomon ibn Verga in his ‘Shevet Yehudah’.<sup>620</sup>

In all these disputations, the basic truth of Christianity was invariably presumed by the judges (members of the royal family, the nobility or the Pope) from the outset; and the sole issues for determination were the content of the Talmud (and, to a lesser degree, other rabbinic works), its stance towards Christianity, and whether action ought to be taken to ban it outright.

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<sup>616</sup> See Baer, 170-243; Maccoby: Judaism on Trial, 82-94; 168-215.

<sup>617</sup> Maccoby, 93-94.

<sup>618</sup> Baer, 184.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid. 209.

<sup>620</sup> S. Ibn Verga: *Shevet Yehudah*, ed. A. Shohat (Jerusalem, 1947) 94-101.

The rabbinic authorities clearly could not rely upon the favourable outcome of disputations to vindicate Judaism against its Christian detractors. They were worried that their own co-religionists might become weakened in their faith because of the physical persecution to which they were being subjected.<sup>621</sup> There was a serious danger that the ordinary Jew might conclude that, since the Church was so powerful and the Jews so weak and degraded, perhaps the Christians were indeed the ‘New Israel’, because of their acceptance of the Messiah rejected by the Jews. Accordingly, the foremost Jewish thinkers found it necessary to incorporate their theological challenges to Christian doctrine within their biblical exegesis, so that their co-religionists, imbibing the arguments, might thereby be fortified in their own traditional beliefs. However, they had to be careful not to be too explicit in the manner they attacked Christian doctrine; hence their criticisms were often merely subtly implied. Rashi, for example, well aware of the standard Christian interpretation of the ‘Suffering Servant’ passage in Isaiah 53 as a predictive description of Jesus as the Messiah, deliberately chose to ignore the traditional *midrashic* exegesis reflected in

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<sup>621</sup> The conventional view that the century before the Expulsion was one of continuing decline in Iberian Jewry’s fortunes is qualified to some extent by Mark Meyerson in his recent work ‘A Jewish Renaissance in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain’. He focuses for this purpose on the particular community of Morvedre, in the Valencia region, showing how it flourished during this period, owing to its protection by the rulers and municipal officials. I consider it unsound, however, to attempt to extrapolate a general picture from an isolated example; and in any event, Meyerson himself concedes that ‘the Jews of Morvedre did not emerge from the dreadful summer of 1391 entirely intact’, that in 1392 their position ‘remained precarious’, that King Joan (*sic*) broke his promise to the Jews in 1392 not to make ‘extraordinary’ demands on them for the next five years, and that he recognised the necessity of preventing the Conversos from returning to Judaism or from fleeing the country for that purpose. He admits further that Jewish- Christian relations in Morvedre ‘were by no means free of difficulties’, that investigations were made by royal officials into Jewish practices and rituals, e.g. the Passover ceremonies, were made in 1393, that an ecclesiastical visitation occurred in 1398, and that Queen Maria’s death in 1406 ‘deprived the Jews of Morvedre of their staunchest defender’, after which ‘prosecution of Jews then resumed’. Evidently, the community’s fortunes subsequently improved significantly as the 15<sup>th</sup> century wore on, but, on balance, the evidence from Morvedre is, in my view, insufficient to overturn the conventional picture. See M. Meyerson: A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 2004) 26, 31-32, 36, 38, 51, 53 *et al.*

Targum Jonathan to that chapter,<sup>622</sup> and the Talmud,<sup>623</sup> that Isaiah was indeed referring to the figure of the Messiah, in favour of a totally different approach, viz. that he was alluding to the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>624</sup> Other early medieval Jewish exegete attempting refutations of christological interpretations of the Bible, who were more explicit than Rashi in their condemnation, were (*inter alia*) R. Samuel b. Meir ('Rashbam') (12<sup>th</sup> cent., France), Joseph Bekhor Shor (12<sup>th</sup> cent., France) and R. David Kimhi ('Radak') (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> cent., Provence). Rashbam, commenting on Genesis 49:10, expressly states that his interpretation of the key word '*Shiloh*' in that verse as referring to a city (where the monarchy was renewed by Rehoboam's coronation in neighbouring Shechem), 'constitutes a refutation of the heretics', who, he explains, interpreted '*shiloh*' as equivalent to '*shaliah*' (the [Divine] emissary).<sup>625</sup> (This verse was one of the most popular medieval Christian proof-texts.) Bekhor Shor specifically repudiated Christian allegorical explanations denying the validity of the precepts, expressing himself forcefully on one occasion: 'Although they (the Christians) have translated the Bible from the holy tongue into the vernacular, the Lord has given them neither a heart to understand, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear' (Commentary to Numbers 12:18). Radak attacks christological interpretations either by demonstrating Christian corruption of the text,<sup>626</sup> or the inapplicability<sup>627</sup> or irrationality of the interpretation.<sup>628</sup> He too, like Bekhor Shor, decries the Christian interpreters' allegorical tendency, and fends off the Christian attempt to claim the name of Israel

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<sup>622</sup> E.I.J. Rosenthal: 'Medieval Jewish Exegesis: Its Character and Significance' in: Journal of Semitic Studies 9, no.2 (1964) 264-281.

<sup>623</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 98b.

<sup>624</sup> Rashi to Isaiah 53.

<sup>625</sup> Rashbam to Genesis 49:10, in unexpurgated editions.

<sup>626</sup> See Radak: Commentary to Isaiah 2:22; Ps.22:17; 110:1, etc.

<sup>627</sup> Idem: Commentary to Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>628</sup> Idem: Commentary to Ps.87, end; 110, end, etc.

for the Church, simultaneously emphasising the superior morality and religiosity of the Jews.<sup>629</sup>

## 2. Complicating Factors

However, the battle-lines between Judaism and Christianity were in reality not so neatly drawn as the above account might suggest. Orthodox Christians, certainly from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, perceived danger to their faith as emanating not merely from the Talmud (the repository of traditional Jewish belief, law and ritual practice), but also from the Jewish Aristotelian philosophers, such as Maimonides, who espoused ‘liberal’ views in religion (and were indeed regarded as a menace even within Jewry). Admittedly, the foremost medieval Christian theologian, Aquinas, had been a thoroughgoing Aristotelian, but from about 1230, a strong anti-Aristotelian reaction, spearheaded by the Dominicans, had set in, even during Aquinas’ lifetime, which was destined to govern the Church’s ideology for much of the remainder of the medieval era. The ecclesiastical authorities were only too eager to ascribe unorthodox currents within their own ranks to the pernicious influence of Jewish philosophers, of whom there were indeed many within Spain and Provence. These were Maimonidean in approach, but frequently their rationalism had far exceeded that of their ideological mentor. It was due to the existence of these anti-philosophical trends within the 13th century Catholic Church that the strictly traditionalist Jews had succeeded, with Dominican co-operation and encouragement, in having Maimonides’ ‘Guide for the Perplexed’ publicly burnt in Montpellier in 1232.<sup>630</sup> (This bizarre alliance between orthodox Catholicism and traditionalist Jewry was, needless to say, very short-lived –

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<sup>629</sup> Idem: Commentary to Ps.19:10; 119, *passim*, etc.

<sup>630</sup> Sarachek: *Faith and Reason* (N.Y.1970) 86-88.

just ten years later, the Dominicans succeeded in having the Talmud burnt too, as aforementioned.)

The later 14th century had seen a continuing decline in the fortunes of Iberian Jewry as a result of Christian persecution. In 1391, Spanish Jewry had been subjected to an unprecedentedly intense level of violent persecution, culminating in mass slaughter of the Jewish population and huge numbers of forced baptisms.<sup>631</sup> (Abrabanel's own grandfather, then resident in Spain, had been one of these baptismal victims, though he later migrated to Portugal, reverting to Judaism.) The Disputation of Tortosa merely set the seal upon prevailing conditions. Persecution of Jews was not confined to Spain – it was fairly prevalent throughout Europe during this period, wherever there were sizeable Jewish communities. Not least amongst these was Portugal, where Abrabanel was born in 1437.

### 3. Abrabanel's Own Background

The young Isaac grew up in this generally hostile environment, though several mitigating factors were operative in his case. The first of these was the dawn of the Renaissance era in Europe, which coincided with Isaac's formative years. Its more enlightened and humanistic outlook had begun to penetrate the Iberian Peninsula. Secondly, the Portuguese sovereign from 1438 to 1481, Alfonso V, was relatively benign and tolerant, ready to appoint talented Jews to high positions of state.<sup>632</sup> The Royal Treasurer was Isaac's father, Judah, who, by virtue of his exalted status, naturally came into contact with the highest echelons of Portuguese society, with whom he succeeded in establishing good relations. These contacts were to stand his

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<sup>631</sup> Baer, 170-243.

<sup>632</sup> See Abrabanel: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua, 2.

son, Isaac, in good stead when he succeeded to his father's post on Judah's death in 1471.<sup>633</sup>

As aforementioned, Judah had ensured that Isaac received a well-rounded secular education.<sup>634</sup> Fluent in his native Portuguese, Spanish, Latin and Hebrew, his studies, besides Bible and Talmud, had included the typically humanist diet of classical philosophy, ancient and medieval European history, rhetoric, natural sciences, and Christian theology and scholasticism. Subsequently, as a courtier, he would have had direct access to Christian theologians and senior ecclesiastics. He indeed mentions, in his commentary to Deuteronomy, the dialogue he had conducted with Christian theologians on the subject of divorce, when he had challenged the Christian ban upon it as inhumane.<sup>635</sup>

Rabinowitz, in his 1937 Cambridge lecture on Abrabanel, listed numerous Christian theologians cited by Abrabanel within his biblical commentaries. These ranged from early Church Fathers, such as Jerome and Augustine, through the ecclesiastical historian the Venerable Bede, to Aquinas, and the scholastic, Nicholas de Lyra. Similarly, Rosenthal states that Abrabanel 'learned much... from Christian exegetes such as Jerome, Bede, Isidore of Seville, Albertus Magnus, Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos...' <sup>636</sup> Rosenthal significantly adds that Abrabanel's exegetical method was scholastic (i.e. influenced by the medieval Christian scholastics) 'in that he carefully reviews previous exegesis before giving his own opinion'. I would add to this the fact

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<sup>633</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>634</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>635</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 221-222.

<sup>636</sup> E.I.J. Rosenthal: 'The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism' in: The Cambridge History of the Bible 2 – The West from the Fathers to the Reformation (Cambridge, 1969) 272-274.

that, according to Joseph Delmedigo, Abrabanel displayed considerable interest in the leading Church Father Augustine.<sup>637</sup> Again, it will be recalled that Gaon's doctoral dissertation attempted to demonstrate (albeit somewhat controversially) that Abrabanel's pentateuchal exegesis was heavily influenced, both in methodology and substance, by the renowned early 15th century Spanish Catholic theologian and biblical commentator Alfonso Tostado, despite the absence of any reference to him in his writings.<sup>638</sup>

In any event, Abrabanel was reared within an intellectual and cultural environment deeply permeated by staunch Catholic orthodoxy. The scholastic tradition, developed in the High Middle Ages, still predominated, though latterly it had become tinged with a measure of the humanistic spirit constituting a characteristic feature of the succeeding Renaissance era. Tostado's writings breathed an air of comparative tolerance (he was indeed accused of heresy himself, though ultimately acquitted!). The humanist spirit, insofar as it related to biblical exegesis, encouraged exploration of the historical context in which the Scriptures had been composed, veering increasingly away from allegorical interpretation towards a literal and contextual understanding of the biblical text and emphasis on the original Hebrew language for study of the Old Testament (as opposed to the traditional reliance on Jerome's ancient Latin translation, the Vulgate, adopted by the Church as its authoritative version). Humanism also encouraged a broader spirit of enquiry than the medieval Church had allowed.

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<sup>637</sup> Klatzkin, J: 'Augustine' in: Encyclopedia Judaica 3, ed. C.Roth & G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1972) 851-852.

<sup>638</sup> See Introduction (Literature Review).

It is thus within this complex intellectual and cultural environment that Abrabanel operated. Besides his formal, literary education and the special opportunities afforded him by virtue of his elevated political status, he possessed a natural propensity for enquiry, evidenced by the fact that, unlike his exegetical predecessors, who were content merely to make general allusions to the views of ‘the Christians’, he frequently cites particular Christian theologians by name, occasionally even adding descriptive epithets, leaving us in no doubt that he had actually read their works.

#### 4. Abrabanel’s Stance towards Christianity

Although Abrabanel was by no means the first Jewish biblical commentator to advert to Christian interpretations of Scripture in his exegesis, he undoubtedly does so more elaborately and systematically than any of his predecessors. It is significant that his commentaries to Isaiah and Daniel, containing the most extensive reviews of the Christian messianic claims and trenchant critique of their position, were composed after the Jewish expulsion from Spain, when Abrabanel resided in Italy, where Renaissance humanistic currents were strongest and a greater measure of tolerance was afforded to Jews than on the Iberian Peninsula. A further consideration in this connection is that Abrabanel was writing in Hebrew, specifically for a Jewish readership, and hence could not have anticipated the exceptional interest in his exegesis displayed subsequently within Christian circles. Nonetheless, Italy was hardly an intellectual ‘free-for-all’; for, as will be seen, Abrabanel’s commentaries did not escape the censor’s hand, and only in 1551, over forty years after his death, did an unexpurgated version of his commentary to Deuteronomy (completed in Monopoli) first appear.<sup>639</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy (Sabbionetta, 1551).

It must additionally be appreciated that Abrabanel was writing in the wake of the Expulsion, the greatest calamity to have befallen Jewry since the destruction of the Second Temple. He knew that his co-religionists, even those who had refused to apostasise in the face of frequent persecution, felt bitter about their fate and were perpetually plagued by the burning question as to why God had allowed their enemies to triumph over them, notwithstanding all their sacrifices for their faith. Perhaps they had concluded that the Christian messiah was indeed the true redeemer, whom they now needed to accept for their salvation. As a responsible communal leader and acknowledged religious authority, Abrabanel needed to provide a plausible Judaic theological framework within which the suffering could be explained without recourse to the beguiling Christian alternative. Thus his exegesis of the relevant scriptural texts served a dual purpose; first, to interpret these biblical passages in their contextual sense (which would automatically preclude a Christian, futuristic interpretation), and secondly, to interpret events, portents and predictions found in the Hebrew Bible within the accepted framework of Jewish history and ideology.

Truly astounding, however, is Abrabanel's degree of objectivity; it is this feature that distinguishes him from all his illustrious predecessors who engaged in anti-Christian polemics. From a personal angle, he had every reason to abhor Christianity, which, through the Inquisition and other instruments of persecution, had, in his own lifetime (let alone previously), been directly responsible for the death and ruin of so many of his co-religionists, yet he still occasionally managed to find some favourable words to say about their biblical interpretations, and even in general terms about their religion.

Such a phenomenon is, to my knowledge, unparalleled in the entire history of classical Jewish biblical exegesis.

#### 4.1 Abrabanel's Exegetical References to Christianity.

We are now in a position to explore Abrabanel's various allusions to Christianity interspersed throughout his exegetical writings. These can broadly be divided into four separate categories, which will be summarised and analysed in turn below.

##### 4.1.1 References to Christian Scholars' Views on Non-Doctrinal Matters, such as:

A. His elaborate citation of the view of a leading Christian theologian, the apostate Don Pablo (Paul), Bishop of Burgos, as to why the prophet Samuel so vehemently opposed the Israelites' demand for a king, despite the apparent licence for this in Deuteronomy 17:14-15. This occurs in his commentary to I Samuel 8, within his lengthy discussion of this fundamental issue.<sup>640</sup> Abrabanel presents five different views as to how the passage in I Samuel can be reconciled with that in Deuteronomy, the last of which he claims to have heard in the name of 'Don Pablo, erstwhile Bishop of Burgos'.<sup>641</sup> Pablo maintains that there are two types of ruler: the first, who acknowledges that his power stems from God and will accordingly enact no legislation besides that of the Pentateuch. The second, however, recognises no such superior Divine authority, but freely enacts his own laws, frequently tyrannical in character. Samuel feared that, when the people requested a monarch 'like all the nations', they had the latter in mind, which would have been in fundamental

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<sup>640</sup> Idem: Commentary to Samuel, 204.

<sup>641</sup> The bishop's full name was Don Pablo de Santa Maria, *alias* the renowned apostate Jew Solomon Ha-Levi, who converted to Christianity during the Spanish persecutions of 1391. Rising rapidly through the clerical ranks, he ultimately became Bishop of Burgos, a position held until his death. Though Abrabanel cites him elsewhere in his biblical exegesis, he invariably uses his Jewish name and mentions his apostasy. Remarkably, he fails to do so here.

opposition to the concept of the ruler as adumbrated in Deuteronomy. Hence his protest.

Abrabanel's treatment of Pablo's argument is most interesting. He adumbrates it in detail, ostensibly treating it with great respect, and even adducing further theoretical arguments of his own in its support – to the point where the reader is initially beguiled into believing that he actually concurs with it. However, he then proceeds to demolish it, on purely intellectual and textual grounds, exactly as he has done with the four previous views emanating from authentic Jewish sources. Thus Abrabanel effectively places the authority of Pablo, a Christian ecclesiastic, on a par with that of Nahmanides, R. Nissim Gerondi ('Ran'), and even the Talmudic sages! Such boldness of approach must be unique in the annals of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis. Moreover, Abrabanel does not openly disdain Pablo for his apostasy or subsequent campaign of hatred and persecution against his former co-religionists.

Notably, too, Abrabanel states that Nahmanides' view that the people's offence in requesting a king was that they chose to do so in Samuel's time (thus demonstrating their rejection of his leadership), was also to be found amongst 'the Christian sages', though in this instance he cites no specific source. This is yet another indication of his familiarity with Christian exegesis.

#### B. Interpretation of the Episode of the Witch of Endor (I Samuel 28)

In his discussion of this episode,<sup>642</sup> Abrabanel mentions, alongside other views, that of the Church Father Augustine, that it was actually not Samuel at all who appeared to

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<sup>642</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 296.

Saul in a vision, but a demon in the guise of Samuel.<sup>643</sup> He dismisses this view on various rational grounds, e.g:

- If the apparition was indeed a demon, why does the biblical text call him Samuel?
- If Samuel's own resurrection was impossible, and the only being capable of being raised was a demon, why did the witch ask Saul whom he wanted to be raised, thereby evoking Saul's response that he desired Samuel.
- How could the demon have told Saul: 'Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me'? Plainly, Saul and his sons would not, after death, be in devils' company!

Abrabanel does not attempt to refute Augustine's view merely by recourse to Jewish tradition, but presents logical arguments potentially acceptable to all, irrespective of their adherence to Judaism.

Furthermore, Abrabanel is equally dismissive of various other views as to the true meaning of this episode advanced by Jewish sages. It is thus significant that he is willing to cite an authoritative Christian view alongside several others and subject them all equally to critical analysis. He is manifestly eager to present the widest possible spectrum of opinions for consideration, this being the hallmark of an intellectual, as opposed to a dogmatic, approach.

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<sup>643</sup> Interestingly in this connection, International Critical Commentary to I Samuel (Edinburgh, 1899) 241, states: 'The more sober Protestant commentators see that it is unreasonable to suppose the souls of the departed subject to such calls, and therefore suppose the Devil to assume the form of the one invoked. But this is contrary to the assertion that the woman saw *Samuel*'. These Protestant commentators have, unwittingly, allied themselves with the Catholic Augustine, whilst Abrabanel upholds the text's literal meaning.

### C. The Inner Significance of the Materials used in Constructing Solomon's Temple (Response to Abrabanel's 6th question on the passage in I Kings 8).<sup>644</sup>

The context here is that of the symbolic meaning of the various Temple vessels, elaborately described in this chapter. Abrabanel commences his discussion of the topic by citing the views of two leading Jewish philosophers, Maimonides and Gersonides, that they represent abstract concepts, such as, for example, the pre-existent hylic material from which, according to the ancient Greek philosophers, the universe was created. The Christian sages, he informs us, broadly followed suit, but did not accept that *all* the vessels were intended to have a symbolic meaning – only the Temple buildings, the Table, the Candelabrum, the Altar, the Laver and its Basin did; but the remaining vessels were required purely for practical use for the rituals of the Temple and its beautification. He concludes:

... *'And, truth to tell, I regard their (the Christian sages') words in this respect as more to the point than all the words of the sages of our own people that I have mentioned'.*<sup>645</sup>

For, as he is at pains to explain, one need not seek symbolic interpretations for everything; Solomon was, after all, constructing an earthly edifice for the use of ordinary mortals.

This passage is notable for Abrabanel's express declaration of his preference for the Christian interpretation on this matter over the Jewish philosophical one. It must, however, be appreciated that the issue here is purely neutral, involving no

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<sup>644</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Kings, 520.

<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

fundamental doctrine, and Abrabanel's essentially practical mindset comes to the fore. He additionally perceives an element of danger inherent within the Jewish philosophers' general allegorising tendencies, which, taken too far, can easily lead to laxity in practical observance of the precepts, which might likewise be understood symbolically.

D. A lengthy discussion, in his commentary to Isaiah 35, as to whether the biblical prophecies relating to Edom are actually cryptic references to Rome (both in its pagan and later, Christian form) as the rabbinic sages consistently maintain. He refers, on the one hand, to the view of Solomon ha-Levi (*alias* Bishop of Burgos) that Edom and Rome are not identical, the Rabbis having deliberately falsified Scripture in this regard to suit their purposes;<sup>646</sup> and, on the other, in refutation of this, to the observations of the medieval scholastic Nicholas de Lyra, whom he describes, here and elsewhere, as the Christians' 'outstanding exegete')<sup>647</sup> and of Isidore of Seville, whom he describes as one of the early great Christian authorities.<sup>648</sup> Abrabanel also adduces evidence from the historian Josippon (whom, as we have seen, he erroneously identified with Josephus) that men of Edomite descent had migrated to Italy in ancient times, in support of the unanimous rabbinic tradition that Edom and Rome were synonymous.<sup>649</sup> He adds that in the course of time, these Edomites and their descendants all converted to Christianity. Hence, both as regards ethnic descent and religion, the rabbis were fully justified in identifying Edom with Rome.

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<sup>646</sup> Ha-Levi was well-versed in *halakhah* and Jewish and Arabic philosophy. Abrabanel uses this opportunity to execrate him for his shameful apostasy, and, in typical fashion, taunts him for his intellectual ineptitude, pointing out that he could have employed far stronger arguments to bolster his case.

<sup>647</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 170.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid. 171. Isidore is indeed regarded as one of the Doctors of the Catholic Church.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.171.

Although Josippon's account, faithfully reproduced by Abrabanel, is indeed largely fanciful, it is significant that Abrabanel, here as elsewhere, feels it important to bolster rabbinic tradition by recourse to independent, non-rabbinic sources. His ultimate purpose is seemingly to demonstrate to his Jewish readership that contemporary Christian Rome is the authentic embodiment of the biblical Edom, so that all the predictions of doom uttered by Isaiah and other prophets against that nation, Israel's ancient foe, can credibly be applied to Rome, the source of all its present woes.

E. Another intriguing and pointed reference to contemporary Christianity occurs in Abrabanel's commentary to Isaiah 25:2, where the prophet employs the phrase '*armon zarim me'ir*' ('a palace of strangers to be no city'). Radak and Metzudot David on this verse both interpret this as alluding to the Babylonian palaces, which are to be destroyed; and this seems the correct contextual interpretation. Abrabanel, however, gives the phrase a totally novel meaning, suggesting that the 'palace of strangers' alludes to the Vatican. He writes:

(14) *...And the “palace of strangers” alludes to Rome, for all three of them (i.e. Rome, Rhodes and Constantinople, the two other cities he has previously mentioned) constitute the pillars of the Kingdom of Edom together with its religion...it is, moreover, fitting for Rome to be called ‘the palace of strangers’, because (of the) papal palace, where the outstandingly powerful men, known as cardinals, and the bishops, mainly emanate from other realms, and (only) rarely is a native Roman to be found amongst them; ... also the Pope himself, whom they (elect and) anoint, stems from alien stock, sometimes from France, sometimes from Spain, and sometimes from*

*Germany and other countries – and perhaps it is for that reason that it (the Vatican) is called (by the prophet) ‘the palace of strangers’....*<sup>650</sup>

As to whether Abrabanel was exegetically justified in wresting the passage from its historical context is irrelevant here, as our present concern is to illustrate the significance he attached to contemporary Christianity, even its institutional framework.

F. The source of the light mentioned in connection with the first day of Creation (in Genesis 1:3), where Nicholas de Lyra (who studied Rashi’s biblical commentary and incorporated a significant quantity of rabbinic exegesis into his ‘Postilla’) is cited.<sup>651</sup> Nicholas is described as having ‘interpreted the Torah for the Gentiles’, and it is plain from this passage and others that Abrabanel regarded him with respect (notwithstanding that Nicholas included several anti-Judaic sentiments in his works). Here Abrabanel informs us that this outstanding Christian exegete shared Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ view that the ‘light’ mentioned actually emanated from the heavenly luminaries.

#### 4.1.1 Jesus’ Lineage and Messianic Credentials

This theme will conveniently be explored fully later, in the course of Abrabanel’s exposition of various chapters of Isaiah other than Ch. 11, which is the most immediately relevant in this context, and will accordingly be dealt with first.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 139.

<sup>651</sup> Idem: Commentary to Genesis, 8.

<sup>652</sup> See pp.257-268.

#### 4.1.1.1 Abrabanel's Exposition of Isaiah 11.

This is a messianic chapter, very different in nature from Isaiah 53. Abrabanel, in his relevant commentary, explains that the Christians claim that the prophecy with which the chapter commences, ‘And a shoot shall come forth out of the stock of Jesse...’ refers to Jesus. He argues, however, that Jesus could not have been from the stock of Jesse (King David’s father) if he was not the natural son of Joseph, the husband of his mother Miriam, because the Matthean genealogy they adduce is Joseph’s, and has no bearing upon Miriam.<sup>653</sup> He adds that the Christian scholars tried to avoid this problem by asserting that Jewish women customarily married only within their own tribe (as Moses ordained for Zelophehad’s daughters),<sup>654</sup> and accordingly, since Joseph was of David’s seed, Miriam must have been likewise. Abrabanel adduces several counter-arguments. First, this law as to marriage within one’s own tribe applied only to women inheriting property, and one cannot automatically assume that Miriam was in that category. Second, even if she did come from the tribe of Judah, it is gratuitous to assume she was actually descended from David. Third, there is both biblical and rabbinic evidence that this law applied only during the early period of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and was later abolished.<sup>655</sup> Finally, in the Second Temple era, there was no longer any division into tribes for the purposes of proprietary ownership.

Abrabanel also expresses astonishment as to why Matthew chose to record Joseph’s genealogy rather than Miriam’s.

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<sup>653</sup> Matthew 1.

<sup>654</sup> Numbers 36:6.

<sup>655</sup> Abrabanel cites the biblical cases of David, a Judean, marrying the daughter of Saul, a Benjaminite, and of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, marrying the daughter of Ahab, an Ephraimite. He further adduces rabbinic evidence for the law’s abolition from the Mishnah, Ta’anit 4:8.

Regarding the prophecy recorded in verse 3: ‘...and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither decide after the hearing of his ears’, Abrabanel observes that Jesus never occupied the position of an Israelite judge. And as regards the idyllic image in verse 6 of ‘the wolf lying down with the lamb’, he observes that there was certainly no universal peace either during Jesus’ lifetime or after his death. Nor, indeed, was there an ingathering of the Jewish exiles, as foretold in verses 11 and 12.

He concludes, therefore, that the Christian interpretations of this prophecy are totally invalid, and then revealingly explains his motivation for citing them:

*‘...but I have disclosed them to you here so that your heart should remain steadfast and your hand... strengthened through the authentic truth of the methods (of exposition adopted by) our (own) commentators on the Scriptures’.*<sup>656</sup>

Altogether, this is a surprisingly bold and direct challenge to the very basis of Christianity, and it is hard to understand how it succeeded in evading censorship.

4.1.2 Philosophical Reflections (to be found only in the unexpurgated, Sabbionetta edition of Abrabanel’s commentary to Deuteronomy), on the ultimate Divine purpose behind the founding of Christianity.<sup>657</sup> These observations are remarkable for their relatively broad-minded approach, as will now be seen.

#### 4.1.2.1 The Sabbionetta (1551) Edition

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<sup>656</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 88

<sup>657</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy (Sabbionetta, 1551).

In this edition, as aforementioned, many interesting references to Christianity and Christians appear, which are absent from the earlier, Venice edition. These include excerpts of a type never encountered in any other edition of Abrabanel - outright attacks on various royal personages who were directly or indirectly responsible for much physical and mental suffering to Abrabanel and/or his co-religionists. At the very beginning of the work, we find a bitter personal attack on Ferdinand of Spain, who, jointly with his wife Isabella, expelled the Jews from Spain. Although Abrabanel does speak of Ferdinand in this connection in the Introduction to his Commentary to the Book of Kings, his criticism there of the king is fairly moderate, with his major invective reserved for Isabella.<sup>658</sup> Historians have long pondered this, and, seizing upon it, have suggested that Ferdinand was not personally hostile to the Jews, and, left to his own devices, would not have expelled them. The Sabbionetta edition fatally undermines that thesis. The relevant passage reads:

*'The Lord stirred up the spirit of Ashmodai, the head of the destroyers, a tyrannical ruler, who reigned over the Spanish kingdoms with an abundance of strength, and he was as mighty as the oak trees to expel all the Jews from all regions of his land, both great and small.'*<sup>659</sup>

The comparison of Ferdinand to Ashmodai, legendary demon king, speaks volumes.<sup>660</sup> We are now left in no doubt as to what Abrabanel really thought of the 'Catholic Sovereign'. Having served Ferdinand loyally as his Treasurer for eight years, Abrabanel must have felt embittered at his royal master's base ingratitude in

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<sup>658</sup> Idem: Introduction to Commentary to Kings, 422.

<sup>659</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy (Sabbionetta) 2.

<sup>660</sup> See Babylonian Talmud: Gittin 68a.

rejecting his heartfelt pleas to rescind the Edict of Expulsion. Whilst there is no explicit reference here to Ferdinand's religion, it is indisputable that his desire to be seen as a loyal son of the Church (among other, more mundane considerations), played a major role in determining the Expulsion.<sup>661</sup>

Notwithstanding such bitter memories, Abrabanel still, amazingly, found himself able to articulate some positive sentiments about Christianity. In a passage quite remarkable for its time, he writes:

*'To this end, He (God) created the cure before the disease – and gave permission and opportunity for the acts of that man who was of... our nation to succeed, insofar as it was through his hand that the Divine Torah would become publicly known and accepted by many of the foreign nations, albeit they did not accept it in its literal sense; and the races of Edom, and Ishmael too, were drawn after him...and these are the two leading nations amongst whom the exiles of Israel have been dispersed.'*<sup>662</sup>

We may best understand this passage as Abrabanel's sincere attempt to make sense of the course of world history over the previous 1500 years, which had undeniably been catastrophic for the Jews. Unable to accept that there was no ultimate Divine justice, or that God had permanently abandoned His people, he was compelled to develop the notion that Christianity and Islam had been His chosen instruments for enabling knowledge of His existence and providence to spread all over the globe, a task that Judaism, because of its essentially parochial and national character, had been unsuited

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<sup>661</sup> See my discussion of this issue in Chapter 1.

<sup>662</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Deuteronomy (Sabbionetta) 22.

to fulfil. Accordingly, the Jews had been called upon to make a stupendous personal sacrifice for the sake of a higher cause.

Superficially, it seems rather surprising that a passage like this, containing a fairly positive view of Christianity, should have been censored. However, it is virtually certain that the censors, who may have been either Jewish or Gentile, felt uncomfortable with the pejorative reference to Jesus as '*that man*'. This was the expression in common use for Jesus in medieval rabbinic literature, invariably bearing a pejorative connotation. As against this, on the other hand, is the fact that Abrabanel had used the identical expression in his commentary to Isaiah 53, which was not censored. My conjecture, and it can be little more than that, is that the Sabbionetta passage also carried with it the subtle implication that Christianity was not an end in itself, the ultimately true faith, profession of which constituted the ultimate goal for all humanity, but simply a means to an end, a stepping-stone towards enabling the Gentile world comfortably to embrace pure monotheism, of which Judaism represented the clearest expression. Such an implication was anathema to Christians.

#### 4.1.3 Challenges to Miscellaneous Aspects of Christian Doctrine and Ideology

In his commentary to Daniel, Abrabanel conducts a sustained polemic against the Christian claim that the *advent* of the true Messiah, whom they declare is Jesus, is predicted by Daniel in his apocalyptic visions. He further surveys the distinctly Christian notion of the anti-Christ, pondering its provenance. Additionally, he provides an exposition of Isaiah 9:5: 'For unto us a son is born; unto us a son is given';<sup>663</sup> and of Isaiah 7 in its entirety, with particular reference to the question of the

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<sup>663</sup> Idem: Commentary to Isaiah, 77.

correct meaning of the key Hebrew word ‘*almah*’ in 7:14, which the Christians, following Jerome’s Vulgate, interpreted as ‘a virgin’.<sup>664</sup>

Also conveniently included under this category is Abrabanel’s record of his dialogue with contemporary Christian scholars concerning divorce, where he challenged their view that it is contrary to nature and currently prohibited by Divine law (despite the apparent dispensation for it in Deuteronomy 24:1).<sup>665</sup>

We shall now survey, in turn, Abrabanel’s Commentaries to Daniel and Isaiah, dealing with doctrinal issues.

#### 4.1.3.1 Daniel 7.

As Abrabanel himself informs us in the Preface to that part of his Commentary on Daniel known as ‘Ma’ayenei ha-Yeshu’ah’, his primary motivation for composing his commentary to this esoteric Book, was to bring hope and comfort to his storm-tossed nation in the wake of their expulsion from Spain in 1492, followed just five years later by their enforced conversions in Portugal.<sup>666</sup> Not only had many been forced into baptism; some had voluntarily converted to Christianity to save their lives and possessions, whilst others who had not yet abandoned their forefathers’ faith, were rapidly losing all hope in the promised redemption of the Jewish people. His aim was to reassure his embattled co-religionists that all the calamities and misfortunes that had befallen them had indeed been predicted millennia earlier by the prophets, whose assurances of messianic redemption were shortly to materialise. Although Abrabanel

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<sup>664</sup> Ibid. 67-68.

<sup>665</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 221-222.

<sup>666</sup> Idem: Commentary to Hagiographa (Jerusalem, 1960) 275.

was not by nature mystically inclined (*pace* Netanyahu's contrary view), he saw the apocalyptic Book of Daniel as the perfect vehicle for conveying his own deeply-felt convictions on this matter. He himself ardently believed that the messianic era was imminent, having gleaned such notions from the abundant biblical prophecies speaking of Israel's final redemption in the wake of national trauma and catastrophe.<sup>667</sup> He refused to believe either that God had abandoned His people, or that the messianic prophecies of Isaiah and others were mere pipe-dreams.

Abrabanel felt it imperative to demonstrate how all Daniel's apocalyptic visions actually related to the messianic age, rather than to the Second Temple era. He was acutely aware, as he himself remarks, that Ibn Ezra had interpreted the visions as allusions to the Greek domination of Israel under Antiochus Epiphanes, the subsequent defeat of the Greeks and Jewish Hellenists, and the rule of the Hasmoneans. Moreover, even Rashi and Radak, who had acknowledged that some of Daniel's prophecies were messianic, conceded that others referred to the Second Temple period. For Abrabanel, such interpretations were not only a perversion of history, but self-defeating, since, if these ancient prophecies had long since been fulfilled, what hope remained for the Jews?

The Daniel commentary is divided into two parts, Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshu'ah, containing twelve primary chapters, each of which is sub-divided into several smaller sections, and Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah, containing seventeen chapters.

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<sup>667</sup> It is of interest to note, *passim*, David Abulafia's view that Abrabanel's focus upon imminent messianism is paralleled by that of the contemporary Spanish Christians, visible in the self-image of the kings of Aragon, which itself was perhaps generated by Converso influence.

In Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshu'ah (ch.8 subs. 6), Abrabanel deals with the classic Christian interpretations of Daniel's messianic visions, endeavouring to refute them.<sup>668</sup> In Chapter 7 of his Book, Daniel is described as having been vouchsafed a heavenly vision of four beasts (7:3), clearly intended to symbolise particular nations, whose individual identity is not revealed. The fourth beast has ten horns (7:7), plus an eleventh, smaller one (7:8). Both the Christians and many Jews maintain that the fourth beast represents Rome, and its ten horns allude to its ten rulers who reigned before the coming of Christ, or to ten separate kingdoms dominated by Rome. The description, in verse 9, of the 'setting up of thrones and the sitting (upon them) by the "Ancient of Days", is interpreted by the Christians to refer to Jesus returning to earth on the Day of Judgment to judge the world and destroy his mortal foe, the 'anti-Christ' (symbolised by the eleventh horn). This latter figure is to rule mankind for a period of three-and-a-half years, during which he will continue to perpetrate many evils, including persecution of the Christians, whereafter he will be cast into a fiery furnace (Hell) and all earthly kingdoms still not belonging to Jesus will cease to exist.

Abrabanel now sets himself the elaborate task of refuting these various claims. We may conveniently summarise several of his arguments here:

- What is the source for the entire Christian concept of the anti-Christ, which is certainly not rooted in any Hebrew prophetic writings?
- Even assuming that there is valid scriptural warrant for an anti-Christ, he cannot be reckoned as the eleventh ruler, in accordance with Christian exegesis, as he did not appear during the era of the initial ten Roman

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid. 338-341.

rulers (regardless of whether these are the ten original Roman kings or the later Emperors).

- Christian exegesis interprets the phrase ‘The Ancient of Days’ (*‘Attiq Yomin’*) to mean the Trinity. However, the expression, in the original Aramaic, is in the singular form, denoting a single personage.
- The Christian exegetes sometimes identify the fourth beast with Rome, whilst elsewhere they maintain it is the anti-Christ. Hence their interpretations are self-contradictory.
- In Daniel 7:12, it is stated: ‘And (as for) the other beasts, their dominion was removed, yet their lives were prolonged for a season and a time’. Since the Christian exegetes explain this as an allusion to the other kingdoms preceding Rome, why do they not, by the same token, interpret the slaying of the fourth beast as a reference to Rome’s destruction? (Abrabanel implies that they cannot afford to do so, as they would thereby be conceding that Rome, the current seat of the Catholic Church, will ultimately cease to exist.)
- Based exclusively upon the obscure phrase *‘idan, idanin u-f’lag idan’* (*‘a time, times and half a time’*) in Daniel 7:25, the Christians claim that the anti-Christ’s rule on earth, and his persecution of the Christians (*‘the saints being given into his hands’*), will endure for three-and-a-half years. This, however, seems unreasonably brief in the light of the further statement in Daniel 7:12 that the dominion of the beasts in general will be ‘prolonged’.
- How can the Christians suggest that the Day of Judgment is required to judge the anti-Christ, one individual human being, when, over the past 1500 years, all the Jews and, subsequently, the Muslims, have also denied Jesus – and the

Muslims have conquered the Holy Land, controlling Christian sacred sites?

Why has Jesus not exacted vengeance on these other enemies all this while?

- Why do the Christians insist that Christ will re-appear in human form for the Final Judgment, whilst simultaneously claiming that his Incarnation occurred merely to enable him to accept death to save the souls of all humanity, a task long since accomplished?

After posing these pointed questions, he explains that Jesus' disciples accepted the ancient Jewish tradition regarding the Messiah (son of David), and his precursor, the Messiah, son of Joseph, and that the Messiah's reign would be preceded by great troubles.<sup>669</sup> They were concerned that the true Messiah - the one recognised by the Jews - might appear in due course, and that he would destroy the religion established by Jesus. Hence they decided from the outset to assert that this man, whilst indeed calling himself the Messiah, would actually be the anti-Christ, an impostor. That, according to Abrabanel, was why the Christians were so anxious to identify Daniel's beast with the eleventh horn as the anti-Christ, an otherwise unknown biblical figure.

At the end of Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshu'ah, (ch.12B subs.8), Abrabanel points out that all Daniel's various prophecies, including Rome's ascendancy and the emergence and growth of Christianity, have already come true, and therefore the Jews have every reason to expect that their ultimate redemption too will occur in due course.<sup>670</sup> This is an integral part of the rationale he employs to comfort his afflicted nation and inspire them with hope. However, this is not to suggest that Abrabanel was disingenuously interpreting Daniel's prophecies in this way purely as a propaganda device. There is

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<sup>669</sup> Ibid. 341.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid. 418-421.

every indication that he sincerely believed the message he was conveying to his co-religionists.

In the course of his elaborate argumentation, Abrabanel intriguingly cites Porphyry, whom he represents as a dissenting Christian scholar, as insisting that Daniel's prophecies were intended to apply to the era of Antiochus and the Hasmoneans.<sup>671</sup> Abrabanel informs us that the other Christian exegetes balked at this. Apparently, Abrabanel's motivation in invoking Porphyry is to exploit the internal division within the Christian camp. However, this citation is in reality a double-edged sword. First, Porphyry was not a Christian at all, but a third century Greek philosopher with excellent biblical knowledge, sympathetic to Judaism and hostile to Christianity.<sup>672</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that he dissents from the Christian viewpoint in regard to these prophecies. Secondly, he does not support Abrabanel's own interpretation of the prophecies, which Abrabanel too, in common with his Christian opponents, maintains are futuristic.<sup>673</sup> Nonetheless, Abrabanel's very mention of Porphyry (though he initially erred regarding his provenance) testifies to the breadth of his historical and theological reading and knowledge.

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid. 339.

<sup>672</sup> Notably, however, in Abrabanel's Commentary to Daniel, Ma'ayanei Ha-Yeshuah, he markedly shifts his stance as to Porphyry's true provenance, correctly describing him there as a Greek Aristotelian and opponent of Christianity.

<sup>673</sup> Porphyry, in his own commentary on Daniel, postulated that it was composed during Antiochus IV's reign, thus not constituting prophecy at all! (He is accordingly a strange bedfellow for Abrabanel!) Porphyry's exegesis of Daniel has been preserved only by Jerome, whose commentary on Daniel was primarily a reposte to Porphyry's attack on the Book's historicity. Jerome's polemic appears at the beginning of the preface to his commentary. See J.A. Montgomery: International Critical Commentary to Daniel (Edinburgh, 1972) 105-106.

Before taking leave of Daniel, it is noteworthy that Abrabanel, in common with the Christians<sup>674</sup> but directly contrary to mainstream Jewish tradition in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>675</sup> and to standard Jewish early medieval exegesis,<sup>676</sup> accords him prophetic status.<sup>677</sup> This is vitally important for Abrabanel's purposes, as he wishes to invest Daniel's apocalyptic predictions with the stamp of Divine authority so as to bring reassurance to his people – for naturally a prophet, transmitting the Divine word, speaks with greater authority than a mere sage. We thus have here another instance of Abrabanel resorting to untraditional means for the overriding purpose of upholding the primary tenets of Jewish tradition and faith. Montgomery concludes that L. Ginzberg sums up the matter neatly:

'He (Abrabanel) controverts both the Christian exegesis and the Jewish rationalism...In opposition to the Talmud and all later rabbinic tradition he counts Daniel among the prophets – but therein only agreeing with the current Christian interpretation. He is impelled to this by the fact that Daniel furnishes the foundation for his Messianic theory'.<sup>678</sup>

#### 4.1.3.2 Isaiah 7:14.

'Behold, the '*almah*' shall conceive and bear a son, and... call his name '*Immanu El*'.

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<sup>674</sup> Matthew 24:15 refers to 'Daniel the prophet'.

<sup>675</sup> See Babylonian Talmud: Bava Batra 14b, where Daniel is listed as belonging to the Hagiographa, not the Prophets.

<sup>676</sup> Radak, in the Preface to his Commentary to Psalms, notes that Daniel was inferior to Isaiah, Ezekiel and the other prophets in that he could not 'maintain strength' (the phrase used in Daniel 10:8) on awaking from his dreams.

<sup>677</sup> Admittedly, Josephus (Ant. X,11,7) describes Daniel as 'one of the greatest of the prophets', but he was scarcely regarded by medieval Jewry as an authentic traditional source.

<sup>678</sup> Montgomery: International Critical Commentary to Daniel, 105-106, citing L.Ginzberg: JE1, 128.

This verse had long been a bone of contention between Jewish and Christian exegetes, as will be seen below. Abrabanel remarks:

(15) ‘... *The Nazarene (Christian) sages have long exerted themselves to refute (the notion) that this ‘young woman’ was the wife of Ahaz or the wife of Isaiah, and posed problems with this (thesis)... I have seen fit to mention them here and to respond to them... to remove a stumbling-block from the path of my people.*

*Their first difficulty is: that if the young woman was Ahaz’s wife, the son who was to be born would be Hezekiah, his son; but they prove that he had already been born before this prophecy, and (accordingly) this chronological reversal is impossible; and if the young woman was Isaiah’s wife, how could he declare later (8:8) ‘And behold, the extending of his wings shall fill the breadth of your land, Immanuel’? This shows that Immanuel will be the lord of the land, whereas Isaiah and his sons were (manifestly) not (lords)...*

‘... *My response to them is... that Immanuel was not Hezekiah, as he had already been born nine years before the reign of Ahaz his father (began); but he (Immanuel) was another son born to Ahaz from another wife, or the young woman was Ahaz’s daughter...*’<sup>679</sup>

This argument, that Immanuel, the child to be born, could not have been Hezekiah, had actually already been advanced by Jerome, following Eusebius.<sup>680</sup> He had demonstrated, by reference to II Kings 16:2, 18:2, & II Ch. 28:1, that Hezekiah was already born *before* the sign was given. It is uncertain whether Abrabanel was aware

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<sup>679</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 67.

<sup>680</sup> A.S. Peake: International Critical Commentary to Isaiah Vol.1 (Edinburgh, 1912) 134, citing Demonstratio Evangelica vii. 1)

of the view of these two Church Fathers, but he still refuses to concede that Isaiah's prophecy might refer to the birth of Jesus, an event many centuries in the future. Interestingly, in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Tryphon the Jew, Tryphon maintains that the child referred to in this passage was Hezekiah (reflecting the ancient rabbinic view).<sup>681</sup> Justin contends that the birth of a first-born after ordinary human intercourse would be no sign.<sup>682</sup>

Abrabanel continues to explain that the prophet's reference to the 'extending of the wings filling the breadth of the land' is not to Immanuel, as lord of the country, but to the Assyrian conqueror, Sennacherib, and his armies, thereby again giving the passage a contextual relevance and refuting the Christian interpretation.

After dealing elaborately with other Christian arguments supporting a christological interpretation of the passage, he triumphantly concludes:

*'Their difficulties (concerning the traditional Jewish exegesis of these verses) have all been removed, and the truth remains in its place, in total mutual agreement from every angle':*<sup>683</sup>

Yet again, Abrabanel is willing to employ an untraditional argument (that Immanuel is not identical with Hezekiah) in defence of tradition.<sup>684</sup> By so doing, he implicitly concedes that the Christian scholars' chronological computation, derived from the

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<sup>681</sup> Ibid.1.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid. 134, citing Justin's Dialogue 43, 48, 66, 67-71, 77f, 84.

<sup>683</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 68.

<sup>684</sup> He is not, however, alone in this instance. The identical argument is employed by Radak, who expressly states that the child Immanuel was to be born from another wife of Ahaz (not Hezekiah's mother). Rashi and Ibn Ezra both identify the '*almah*' of this passage with Isaiah's wife, this view being cited by Jerome.

scriptural information provided, is correct. This type of strategy is comparable to that of a master chess player, who is prepared on occasion to sacrifice a pawn to win the game, and is indicative of Abrabanel's subtle polemical skills.

He proceeds:<sup>685</sup>

*'But... the Nazarenes have indeed derived from the words of Matthew, their apostle, that the statement 'the Lord will give you a sign; behold 'the almah' shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Immanuel' is made about Miriam (Mary) who became pregnant whilst still a virgin, and that she bore Yeshua their god, and accordingly his name was (to be) called 'Immanu El' ('God is with us').<sup>686</sup> But there are seven compelling refutations of them:*

He now advances these refutations, which may be summarised as follows:<sup>687</sup>

- The word '*hineh*' ('behold') appearing in Isaiah's prophecy denotes something that is to occur instantly (he adduces several supporting scriptural parallels) – which would automatically preclude a christological interpretation.
- The Christians claim that the word '*almah*' is only found in Scripture in connection with a virgin (i.e. Rebekah, who is described both as '*almah*' and as '*betulah*', and Miriam, Moses' sister). However, it is clear from the following verses in Proverbs (30: 18-20) that '*almah*' can also refer to a (young) married woman:

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<sup>685</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 68.

<sup>686</sup> International Critical Commentary to Isaiah (Edinburgh, 1912) I,135, cites, besides Herome, the following Patristic interpretations of Isaiah 7:12-16: Iranaeus, Haer.iii 21:1-6; Tertullian: Adv. Marc.iii,13; iv. 10, Adv. Jud.9; Origen, Contra Celsum, i. 34f, in all of which '*almah*' is understood as 'a virgin'.

<sup>687</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 68-69.

‘There are three things that are concealed from me, and four that I do not know. The way of the eagle in the heavens...of a serpent on a rock...of a ship in the heart of the sea, and the way of a man with a young woman. So is the way of an adulterous woman; she eats and wipes her mouth, and... says: “I have committed no sin”.’

- ‘*Almah*’ can thus refer not only to a virgin but (also) to a married woman of whom it is unknown whether she has had intercourse with a third party.<sup>688</sup>
- The expression ‘*harah*’ (‘is conceiving’) in the biblical text appears in the present tense, and thus cannot refer to an event to occur 600 years later.
- The name ‘*Immanuel*’ was not one by which Jesus was ever known.
- The verse (Isaiah 7:16) ‘...before the lad knows to reject evil and choose good’ is the very antithesis of the Christian claim about Jesus, that, from the moment of his birth, he was filled with wisdom to the point of perfection. The Christian response to this objection has been to distinguish between Jesus the god and Jesus the man, but, claims Abrabanel, such distinction is artificial.
- Ahaz’s immediate fear was of the two foreign rulers intent on destroying his country. When Isaiah offered him a sign from God, this would obviously have related to his present danger, not to an event due to occur centuries later. Abrabanel does indeed cite Nicholas de Lyra who adduces various biblical verses suggesting that a sign can be given in one era which will reach fulfilment in another, but attempts to demolish his arguments.
- Abrabanel notes that the end of this Isaianic prophecy also plainly speaks of the advent of Sennacherib, thus making it most improbable that a prophecy

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<sup>688</sup> This particular stance is common to all the traditional commentators, as is the above interpretation of the verses from Proverbs 30.

about Jesus should be sandwiched between two specific references to contemporary events.

He concludes: '*Wherefore should I continue speaking in refutation of this bizarre view that has neither logic nor the biblical text on which to rely?*'

Several interesting points arise here:

- The sheer volume of space Abrabanel devotes to this issue, and his presentation of the Christian arguments, his refutations and their counter-arguments, in such detail. This, I believe, is unprecedented in the previous history of exegetical polemics, demonstrating again his intellectual honesty and broad-minded approach, as well as thorough acquaintance with the subject.
- Despite his wholesale rejection of the Christian viewpoint, he invariably accords their scholars the honorific title of 'Sages'. This is surely significant - he evidently considers them intellectually worthy opponents.<sup>689</sup> He further implicitly acknowledges their proficiency in the biblical text.
- On occasion, he cites the Christian scholars by name, thereby demonstrating his profound acquaintance with their literature. He is unwilling to rely on mere hearsay evidence. None of Abrabanel's exegetical predecessors, to my knowledge, had ever directly cited specific Christian authorities. One interesting further instance of direct citation occurs in the sequel to Isaiah 7, in Abrabanel's commentary to Isaiah 8:3, where he quotes 'Thomas' (Aquinas) as supporting the view that Isaiah's second son, to be called '*Maher-shalal-*

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<sup>689</sup> He adopts the same practice in regard to the Karaites.

*hash- baz*', ('the spoil speedeth, the prey hasteth') was to be so named in allusion to the tribute (Heb. '*shalal*' or '*baz*') forcibly rendered by Hoshea, last ruler of the Northern Kingdom, to the Assyrian invader Shalmaneser.

#### 4.1.3.3 Isaiah 9:5.

Let us now examine Abrabanel's treatment of Isaiah 9:5, another classic christological proof-text. The verse (in its *masoretic* version) reads:

'For a child is born unto us, a son is given unto us, and the government is upon his shoulder; and his name is called '*Pele-jo'ez-el-gibbor-avi-ad-sar-shalom*' ('Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of Peace').'<sup>690</sup>

Abrabanel comments:

'...but the Nazarenes read the word 'va-yikra' ('and He called') as 've-yikarei' ('and he shall be called') i.e. *that he shall be so called by people, and they* (the Christians) *have claimed that this is the reading of the Septuagint. But the phrase* 'a son has been given to us' ('nitan lanu') *proves that he was already born and given at that time, so how could it be interpreted with reference to Jesus, who was (alive) more than 500 years later?...*'<sup>691</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> The translation adopted by me for this problematic verse is that of the Jewish Publication Society of America, reproduced *verbatim* in the 'Soncino Books of the Bible' volume 'Isaiah', 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1961) 44. I consider, judging from Abrabanel's comments on the verse, that he would have endorsed this rendering.

<sup>691</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 77.

It is significant that the Authorised Version of the Bible (the ‘AV’) does indeed, for obvious reasons, render the key words ‘*va-yikra sh’mo*’ (expressed in the past tense) as ‘and his name *shall be called*’ (in the future tense, following the Septuagint).<sup>692</sup> Both readings are indeed grammatically possible, but Abrabanel maintains that the *masoretic* version is more consistent with the immediately preceding verb, ‘*nitan*’, which is likewise in the past tense.

#### 4.1.3.4 Isaiah 53.

We now turn to Abrabanel’s exposition of Isaiah 53, which has always historically constituted the favourite christological proof-text, and is still employed by contemporary Christian missionaries in their encounters with Jews. The entire chapter consists of an elaborate description of a figure known to biblical scholars as ‘The Suffering Servant’, who voluntarily bears bodily affliction, and ultimately undergoes death, for the sins of the many. The identity of this enigmatic figure was a perennial bone of contention between Jews and Christians.

Abrabanel was well aware of the Jewish commentators’ previous attempts to refute the christological interpretation of this passage, but evidently felt that a more comprehensive and convincing refutation was required, as Christian scholars were, in his day, pursuing their line of approach regardless of what the Jews had said. He also acknowledged contemporary Jewish vulnerability in this regard – his co-religionists had been expelled from Spain and forcibly converted *en masse* in Portugal for their

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<sup>692</sup> Authorised Version of the Bible (London, 1611, repub. as The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha, ed. D. Norton (Cambridge, 2005)).

refusal to adopt the dominant faith.<sup>693</sup> Conversion to Christianity evidently constituted an automatic passport into contemporary European society and its Renaissance humanist culture, with all its concomitant rights and privileges. The stakes were higher than ever before, and Abrabanel felt he was fighting not merely an arcane academic battle, but one for the very soul of his co-religionists. This is the background against which he writes, and his exegesis here, and elsewhere when dealing with this topic, must be understood within that context.

As usual, his comments, though lucid, are very lengthy, thus precluding citation in full, but the following passage has been extracted to capture the flavour of the ongoing theological debate.

*(16) ‘The first question (raised by this passage) is to know about whom this prophecy was uttered – for... the Nazarene sages have interpreted it as concerning that man who was hanged in Jerusalem at the end of the Second Temple (era), who, in their view, was the son of the Almighty..., who became incarnate in the womb of a virgin. ... (Targum) Jonathan b. Uzziel indeed interpreted it with reference to the future Messiah, and this is also the view of the Sages... in many of their midrashic expositions... I have likewise seen R. Moses b. Nahman’s exposition of this prophecy, where he interpreted it as referring to the King Messiah; and the Gaon, R. Saadia, expounded the entire passage as referring to Jeremiah...but Rashi and R. Joseph Kimhi, and his son R. David Kimhi all unanimously interpreted the entire prophecy as relating to (the people of) Israel...<sup>694</sup>*

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<sup>693</sup> The 1492 Spanish expulsion was soon followed by a mass forced conversion of the Portuguese Jews by the ruler, Manoel I, in 1497, as aforementioned.

<sup>694</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 241.

*'And... the view of the Nazarene sages is that (the prophecy) should be interpreted in reference to Jesus the Nazarene, who was slain at the end of the Second Temple (era), and that (it is) about him that it is stated (Isaiah 52:13): "He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high', (this being) in accordance with the exposition of the Sages... who expounded (that verse): 'He shall be more exalted than Abraham, elevated higher than Moses, and higher than the ministering angels';<sup>695</sup> (a description) which can only be of the First Cause... the Highest of the High; and concerning Whom it says (Isaiah 53:4): "He is stricken, smitten of God and afflicted" – meaning that he was Divine and (yet) stricken, ... smitten and afflicted – and that (it is) because he nullified the punishment of the souls (of all humanity) that they were suffering (for) the sin of the first man (Adam), (that) it states (53:11): "And their iniquities he did bear" – (and) (53:12): "and he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" – as they (the Christians) have expounded at length in their commentaries.*

*'But this view is totally invalid in accordance with (the light of) reason...' <sup>696</sup>*

Here Abrabanel challenges the Christian view on several grounds. First, he argues that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is there any indication that Adam's punishment was spiritual, rather than purely physical, i.e. becoming mortal. Second, even if it were a spiritual punishment, it would still be contrary to Divine justice for all Adam's descendants, who had not been involved in his sin, to be penalised on his account. Indeed, in this connection the prophet Ezekiel had declared that a son should not

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<sup>695</sup> See Yalkut Shim'oni II to Isaiah 52:13 (Jerusalem, 1960) 801.

<sup>696</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Isaiah, 242.

suffer for his father's sin (and *vice versa*). Third, he asks, has God no other methods of punishment available to Him than that of assuming human guise and taking mankind's duly merited penalty upon Himself?

Whilst such arguments were fine in themselves, Abrabanel was confronted by a major problem regarding the exegesis of this chapter. It was all very well for Rashi and the Kimhis to have interpreted the 'Suffering Servant' of Isaiah 53 in reference to the Jewish people, who are destined to suffer for the sins of the other nations (an explanation not without its difficulties), but, as he himself had noted,<sup>697</sup> Targum Jonathan and the *midrashic* sages had understood the passage as relating to the Messiah.<sup>698</sup> That being so, the Christians could validly argue that even the ancient rabbis, Judaism's authentic exponents, admitted that the prophet was here predicting the advent of the Messiah, leaving only his identity to be ascertained. This was indeed the stance adopted by the Jewish apostate Pablo Christiani in the Barcelona Disputation of 1263, where, ironically, but not entirely without justification, he accused Nahmanides, Spain's foremost rabbinic scholar, of jettisoning authentic Jewish tradition.<sup>699</sup> The Midrash cited above had even accorded the Messiah virtually Divine status ('higher than the ministering angels').<sup>700</sup> Accordingly, adopting the *midrashic* approach was courting grave theological danger; Rashi and the Kimhis, sensing this, had deliberately chosen to depart from hallowed tradition here for the greater good of retaining their co-religionists within the Jewish fold. A further relevant factor militating against the messianic thesis, which must have carried weight with the medieval exegetes, was that the description of a suffering, and slain Messiah

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<sup>697</sup> Ibid. 241, 243.

<sup>698</sup> See pp.265-266.

<sup>699</sup> Kitvei Ramban I: Nahmanides'Disputation, 306.

<sup>700</sup> See p.266.

in Isaiah 53 plainly conflicted with that of the triumphalist messianic figure portrayed in Isaiah 11. (It was naturally not open for these commentators to resolve the contradiction by invoking the currently accepted theory of dual or multiple authorship of the Book of Isaiah, as such a modernist notion was quite beyond their purview. Ibn Ezra had hinted at it, but his was virtually a lone voice in the medieval era.)<sup>701</sup>

Whilst acknowledging that identification of the Suffering Servant with the Jewish people was a convenient way of avoiding unnecessary theological problems, Abrabanel nonetheless felt that there were difficulties with this approach too; for, as he himself observed, all the other prophets, including Isaiah himself elsewhere, had preached that Israel was being punished for its own sins, not for those of the other nations.<sup>702</sup> Moreover, Isaiah 53, read as a whole, did seem to indicate that an individual, rather than an entire nation, was envisaged. He therefore decided, as a skilful polemicist, to advance two alternative explanations, the first, that it was indeed Israel that was intended, and the second, that the passage alluded to an individual, though not to a messianic personage. He accordingly postulated that this figure referred to the righteous King Josiah, slain in battle against the Egyptians.<sup>703</sup> Abrabanel also mentions a third view, propounded by Saadia, that the individual spoken of in this prophecy was the later prophet Jeremiah, though dismissing this notion out of hand. In any event, his exegesis of the passage achieved its objective of avoiding all messianic ideas, as being grist to the Christian mill.

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<sup>701</sup> See Ibn Ezra to Isaiah 40:1.

<sup>702</sup> E.g. Amos 3:2; Isaiah 1.

<sup>703</sup> II Kings 23:29.

## 5. Conclusions

From the evidence presented and examined above, Abrabanel's knowledge of and engagement with contemporary Christianity was plainly multi-faceted and profound. He was compelled to acknowledge the spiritual and temporal power of Europe's dominant faith, which had, on the one hand, captured the hearts and minds of so many, including among his own people, but on the other, been directly responsible for the physical destruction of vast sections of European Jewry. Unlike other Jewish commentators, however, he is not only aware of Christianity, but virtually obsessed with it. It constitutes his intellectual and cultural milieu, and is a crucial point of reference for him. It must be appreciated in this connection that, in Abrabanel's day, Western Europe was not a multi-cultural society. Earlier Islamic influences had been largely extirpated, whilst atheism or agnosticism were virtually unknown. Christianity itself was still monolithic, staunchly Catholic, and Iberia, where Abrabanel lived for most of his life, was heavily dominated by the clergy and the Inquisition. Judaism indeed represented the only genuinely alien element within this monolithic religious and cultural environment.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Abrabanel regarded this type of intolerant Christianity, experienced by him at first-hand, not only as an intellectual challenge to Judaism but as an ongoing physical threat to his people's continued existence. He frequently goes out of his way to cite Christian interpretations of biblical passages, both on theological and non-theological issues. It is clear that he regards his intellectual assault upon Christianity as imperative, not primarily as an academic exercise – to establish the authentic meaning of the biblical text – but to provide his

co-religionists with the weaponry required to withstand Christian blandishments and thus prevent their conversion to the dominant faith.<sup>704</sup> In this context, his occasional endorsement of Christian interpretations within the non-doctrinal sphere is quite remarkable. In this area, he displays an extraordinary ability to *compartmentalise* his mind. His intellectual honesty and genuine search for truth simply will not permit him automatically to condemn what he deems a satisfactory interpretation of Scripture, merely because it emanates from a Christian source. Perhaps the most outstanding example of such tolerance is where he expatiates at enormous length on Bishop Paul of Burgos's views on the controversial subject of Jewish monarchy, treating them as on a par with those of the greatest traditional Jewish authorities. For, besides being a bishop, Paul was also the most high-profile convert from Judaism ever produced by Iberian Jewry, added to which he devoted his entire life as a Christian to the persecution of his former co-religionists! The significance of this has not been sufficiently emphasised by contemporary Abrabanel scholars.

The range of Christian authorities cited by Abrabanel is also truly astounding. He quotes (*inter alia*) from Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Aquinas, Isidore of Seville, Nicholas de Lyra and Paul of Burgos. I am unaware of any other medieval or early modern Jewish exegete with such a broad range of Christian authorities at his command.

In addition to issues of biblical exegesis, Abrabanel espouses an apocalyptic view of Christianity's future role. For, as he mentions in several places, especially in his

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<sup>704</sup> Although Abrabanel's prime purpose was practical, he was also a competent philosopher and theologian, who approached his task in an intellectual manner. His anti-Christian polemics are accordingly marked by reason and logic, rather than simple emotion.

Commentary to Daniel, he envisages the Christians and the Muslims (Edom and Ishmael), both global powers, ultimately wrestling with one another for hegemony and control of the Holy Land, a titanic struggle which will culminate with the appearance of the Jewish Messiah and the restoration of his co-religionists to their rightful patrimony.

He is caustic about the papacy as an institution, as we have seen from his comments to Isaiah 25:2 and his passing observations contained in the Sabbionetta edition of his commentary to Deuteronomy, yet he is, in practice, compelled to acknowledge its temporal power, as where he employs the good offices of his high-ranking Gentile friend, the scholarly diplomat Dr. Sezira, to intercede with Pope Sixtus IV on behalf of Portuguese Jewry.<sup>705</sup> Though fully aware that Christianity has persistently misunderstood and misrepresented Judaism, he remains ready to recognise the vital role it has played in converting the pagan world to monotheism – an attitude truly rare amongst Jewish thinkers, even today.

When analysing Abrabanel's stance towards Christianity, we are thus confronted by many huge paradoxes. Overall, however, having regard to the exceptionally turbulent era in which he lived, his stance is one of relative tolerance. Whilst utterly repudiating all aspects of Christian doctrine, he does not find it incongruous to borrow information and ideas from Christian thinkers and biblical exegetes. Perhaps, in doing so, he had in mind the maxim of the *mishnaic* sage Ben Zoma: ‘Who is wise? He who learns from every man’.<sup>706</sup>

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<sup>705</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>706</sup> Mishnah: Avot 4:1.

## Chapter Six

### Abrabanel and the Karaites

#### 1. Introduction

This theme must be viewed as fundamental within the overall framework of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis because, as contended throughout this dissertation, Abrabanel is primarily (though not exclusively) an exponent of '*P'shat*-type' exegesis, focusing upon the contextual meaning of the biblical text rather than *midrashic* homiletics; and the Karaites – the largest and most influential breakaway sect within medieval Judaism - likewise emphasised the literal /contextual interpretation of Scripture (albeit, in their case, in total opposition to the Oral Law and rabbinic tradition).<sup>707</sup> This ostensible commonality of purpose naturally raises the intriguing issue of the precise intellectual, theological and exegetical relationship of Abrabanel to the Karaites. In particular, I wished to ascertain whether, in his exegesis, he makes any concessions whatsoever to Karaite views, and also whether his approach towards them is rational or dogmatic. Furthermore, as my initial research had established that Abrabanel was the most expansive of all traditionalist biblical exegetes in his discussions of Karaism, I considered it important to establish whether his chief objective here was religious – to combat dangerous heresy – or merely an intellectual exercise.

It is clear, from all we know of Abrabanel, and from his voluminous writings, that he was a firm traditionalist. As evident from Chapter 8, 'The Reception History of Abrabanel's Biblical Exegesis', he is universally acknowledged as an authentic

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<sup>707</sup> The Karaites were, however, not total literalists. They employed inferential reasoning from case to case, developing independent hermeneutic principles for biblical interpretation.

exponent of rabbinic tradition, even in ultra-orthodox Jewish circles. Yet he cites and discusses Karaite views more frequently within his elaborate pentateuchal commentary than any other traditionalist rabbinic exegete before or since. This apparent paradox demands explanation.

Before embarking on this, however, it is important to emphasise the paucity of allusions to the Karaites by Abrabanel's exegetical predecessors. To my knowledge, only Saadia Gaon, the 10th century Babylonian Exilarch, who conducted a running polemic against them, Tobias b. Eliezer (of the Byzantine era) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (12th century) cite them. Maimonides also refers to them, albeit within an *halakhic*, not exegetical, context, and R. Judah ha-Levi of Spain elaborately lambasts their ideology in his philosophical/theological treatise 'Kuzari'. Moreover, Karaism as a movement had been extirpated from Spain in the 13th century by Todros b. Joseph ha-Levi and Joseph Ibn Alfakhar, high-ranking traditionalist Jews, with Christian (royal) assistance, long before Abrabanel's time.<sup>708</sup>

Ostensibly, therefore, there was no urgent need for Abrabanel, writing at the turn of the 16th century within a Karaite-free environment, to refer to them in his commentaries. I would suggest that he nonetheless decided to do so for the following two reasons:

- As already noted in Chapter 1, Abrabanel was broad-minded and strongly imbued with the prevailing humanist spirit of enquiry. Throughout his extensive biblical exegesis, he cites not only Jewish sectarian views, but also those of pagan, Christian and Muslim philosophers and theologians.

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<sup>708</sup> Abraham Ibn Daud: *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* with Eng. trans. Gerson D. Cohen (JPS, Philadelphia, 1967).

Possessing a vast library, he would have had access to numerous and varied works, in manuscript form.

- Although Karaism no longer existed in Iberia (or, indeed, in Italy) in his time, Abrabanel was aware of its continuing pervasive influence in other parts of the Jewish world, primarily Turkey, Egypt, the Levant and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans.<sup>709</sup> He therefore felt that it continued to pose an intellectual and spiritual threat to the adherents of traditional Judaism.<sup>710</sup> Perceiving himself not merely as a biblical exegete, but also as a disseminator of authentic Jewish religious values, he felt obliged to use every opportunity to combat heresy, which, he considered, inevitably resulted in religious anarchy. Whilst not indulging in homiletics, he resorted to the subtleties of the theologian's pen to argue the case for traditional Judaism in a sophisticated literary fashion. It is also quite conceivable that he was galvanised by the contemporaneous Catholic assault on heresy within Christianity into initiating a parallel assault on heresy within Judaism (albeit on the intellectual plane only).

It is admittedly arguable that, because the contemporary Karaite centres were geographically distant from any of the locations where Abrabanel resided during his life, Karaism was, in reality, for him, no more than 'a man of straw', and that his challenge to it was on the theoretical plane only. However, on balance, I deem this ostensibly plausible view erroneous, not only because of Abrabanel's references to the

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<sup>709</sup> Abrabanel expressly mentions 'the Karaites of Constantinople, Damascus and the Land of Israel' in his Commentary to Exodus, 95.

<sup>710</sup> The Jewish social historian Baron estimates that, at the peak of the Karaites' numerical strength, in the High Middle Ages, they constituted up to 40% of the total world Jewish population. By Abrabanel's day their numbers had already significantly declined, but in the area of the former Byzantine Empire, in Crimea and Lithuania, they were not merely a negligible minority.

current ritual practices of the Karaites of Constantinople, Damascus and Palestine,<sup>711</sup> but also because several modern scholars have suggested connections existing between the Karaites and Sephardic refugees from Spain. Astren states that 15<sup>th</sup> century Adrianople became a centre for Sephardic immigration, and, in regard to 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople, he mentions the leading Karaite Bashyazi's predilection towards matters Sephardic found throughout his legal work 'Aderet Eliyahu', and further refers to contact between Caleb Afendopolo (Bashyazi's son-in-law) with Sephardim.<sup>712</sup> When one recalls, in addition, that Abrabanel's son was studying in Turkey at the relevant time, and that Abrabanel himself resided for a while on the island of Corfu, within striking distance of Constantinople, the case in favour of his genuine acquaintance with contemporary Karaism assumes considerable strength.

Abrabanel's various references to the Karaites and their views, interspersed throughout his exegesis, may conveniently be analysed under separate subject heads. I shall then summarise my findings, attempting to extract from the mass of material some all-embracing general conclusions.

A fundamental preliminary issue obviously arises here, as to whether Abrabanel indeed accurately reflects the Karaite views cited by him, as it is feasible that he had insufficient access to their literature, or that it served his interests deliberately to distort their teachings in order to discredit them. One potential way of determining this issue, besides consulting the original Karaite commentaries themselves (which are

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<sup>711</sup> See fn.709.

<sup>712</sup> F. Astren: Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding (Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2004) 223 fn.27.

not all readily accessible, due to the sparseness of the global contemporary Karaite community and its historical suspicion of the printing-press) is to ascertain whether the ideas he attributes to them accord with current Karaite practice. This method is admittedly not determinative, as the Karaites may have altered their practices over time; but, given their markedly conservative tendencies, it does provide a useful pointer. Having thoroughly researched contemporary Karaite websites, e.g. ‘Karaite Korner’,<sup>713</sup> this can be confirmed, with the sole exception of the biblical prohibition on ‘boiling a kid in its mother’s milk’ (Exodus 23:19), where, as will presently be seen, the Karaites were internally divided on the correct interpretation of this precept.<sup>714</sup> Wherever possible, a direct citation from the relevant Karaite source will be placed for comparison alongside Abrabanel’s treatment of the issue.

It is also worth considering why Abrabanel fails to mention several specific areas of ritual practice on which the Karaites differed fundamentally from their rabbinic brethren, such as the wearing of phylacteries (*‘tefillin’*) and the affixing of a *‘mezuzah’* on the doorposts of the home. The Karaites have never historically worn *tefillin*, and until very recently, in Israel, never affixed the *mezuzah* either. The reason adduced for this in their literature is that the relevant precepts, in Deuteronomy 6:8-9 and 11:18 &20, are to be understood metaphorically. I believe that the reason why Abrabanel refrains from assailing them in this regard is that these are not instances of *positive* deviant practices evidencing schism, but of simple passivity. Refraining from ritual observance, whilst clearly reprehensible, is apparently not deemed by Abrabanel

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<sup>713</sup> <http://www.karaite-korner.org/main.shtml> – last updated 14.4.2011.

<sup>714</sup> During my relevant researches, I informally interviewed, several years ago, the spiritual leader of the Jerusalem Karaite community, one Barak Murad, who similarly confirmed the position on all matters on which Abrabanel challenges the Karaites, besides that of ‘meat and milk’.

inimical to the essence of Judaism, as it could be construed as mere laxity in religious practice.

Henceforth, throughout this chapter, the Karaites' opponents will conveniently be referred to as the 'Rabbanites', rather than the 'Rabbis', as this appellation - '*Rabbanin*' - was that employed by the Karaites themselves.

It should further be noted here that, when Abrabanel refers, as he does, to 'the Sages of the Karaites', or to 'the commentaries of the Karaites', he unfortunately never provides direct sources. There would, however, have been no shortage of Karaite biblical commentaries available to him (in manuscript form), some of the most important and extensive of which were those of:-<sup>715</sup>

- A. Japheth b. Ali (10<sup>th</sup> cent.) – frequently cited by Ibn Ezra.
- B. Sahl b. Mazliah ha-Kohen (10<sup>th</sup> cent.)
- C. Jeshua b. Judah (11<sup>th</sup> cent.) – frequently cited by Ibn Ezra, under the appellation 'Yeshu'ah'.
- D. Tobias b. Moses (11<sup>th</sup> cent.) – Ozar Nehmad.
- E. Jacob b. Reuben (12<sup>th</sup> cent.) – 'Sefer ha-Yashar'.
- F. Aaron b. Joseph ha-Rofeh (13<sup>th</sup> cent.) – 'Sefer ha-Mivhar ve-Tuv ha-Mis'har' – the foremost Karaite biblical commentary, completed in 1293.<sup>716</sup>
- G. Aaron b. Elijah of Nicomedia (14<sup>th</sup> cent.) – 'Keter Torah' – a comprehensive pentateuchal commentary, composed in 1362, showing signs of Ibn Ezra's influence.<sup>717</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> The first printed Karaite work appeared only in 1528/29, some twenty years after Abrabanel's death.

<sup>716</sup> Aaron b. Joseph ha-Rofeh: Sefer ha-Mivhar ve-Tov ha-Mis'har (Eupatoria, 1835).

<sup>717</sup> Aaron b. Elijah of Nicomedia: Keter Torah (1st ed., Eupatoria, 1866).

Probably, Abrabanel consulted Aaron b. Elijah's work on the calendar, 'Etz Hayyim'. This composition formed part of a trilogy, the other two works being 'Keter Torah' and 'Gan Eden', essentially a theological treatise. Abrabanel may also have examined Judah Hadassi's major theological work 'Eshkol ha-Kopher',<sup>718</sup> and Elijah Bashyazi's '*halakhic*' compendium, 'Aderet Eliyahu'.<sup>719</sup>

Sacha Stern, in the preface to his work on the Jewish calendar, 'Calendar and Community', explains that he deliberately omitted from the scope of his historical study, covering the period from the pre-rabbinic era up to the 10th century, all discussion of the Karaite calendar, barring a few stray references, since evidence as to precisely what calendar they employed from the founding of their movement (around 760) to the end of the 10th century is very scant.<sup>720</sup> Abrabanel would accordingly have had to consult the later Karaite authorities for information on this subject. Such a conclusion dovetails neatly with the hypothesis advanced above, that his likely source for the Karaite calendar was Aaron b. Elijah.

## 2. Topics on which Abrabanel cites Karaite views

- A. The Karaites and the Jewish Calendar (Exodus 12:1; Leviticus 23:15).
- B. The Manna in the Desert (Exodus 16:13).
- C. 'An Eye for an Eye' (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19-20).
- D. 'You shall not Boil a Kid in its Mother's Milk' (Exodus 23:19).

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<sup>718</sup> J.Hadassi: Eshkol ha-Kopher (Eupatoria, 1836).

<sup>719</sup> 'Aderet Eliyahu' (1st ed., Constantinople, 1531) is a compendium of all precepts incumbent upon Karaites. The work was completed after Bashyazi's death by another major Karaite authority, his son-in-law Kaleb Afendopolo.

<sup>720</sup> S. Stern: Calendar and Community (N.Y.2001) viii.

E. ‘A Memorial of *Teru’ah*’ – ‘A Day of *Teru’ah* shall it be for you’. (Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1).

F. The Four Species on Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:40).

G. Miscellaneous Interpretations of Words and Phrases (Numbers 21:30; 25:4).

H. The Law of Inheritance (Numbers 27:6-11).

## 2.1 The Karaites and the Calendar

Utilising the opening verse of Exodus 12 as a springboard for imparting his own, essentially Rabbanite, but partly novel, views on the Jewish calendar, Abrabanel polemicises lengthily against the Karaites for their deviant calendrical system. The verse in question (12:2) states:

‘This month shall be unto you the head of months; it shall be the first for you of the months of the year’.

Abrabanel explains that, in his view, supported by biblical and *mishnaic* textual evidence, there were, from the outset, two parallel, complementary methods of calculating the advent of the New Moon. One was by mathematical/astronomical computation, and the other, by physical sightings of the fresh lunar crescent roughly every 30 days.<sup>721</sup> Such sightings, by two competent Jewish male witnesses, were to be authenticated by the central ecclesiastical court in Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin) for establishing the correct date of each New Moon, and hence the accurate dates of all the biblical festivals. However, the computational method was always paramount, and

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<sup>721</sup> As Abrabanel himself states (Commentary to Exodus, 94), it was accepted as ‘a law to Moses from Sinai’ that each month consisted of 29.50 days and 793 parts of an hour (the hour being divided into 1080 parts).

after the widespread dispersal of Jewish communities after the destruction of the Second Temple, the sightings system became impracticable, and was rapidly discontinued.<sup>722</sup>

The Karaites, Abrabanel informs us, totally repudiated the computational method, claiming that it was an unwarranted, unscriptural rabbinic innovation of the late Talmudic era, and relied exclusively upon lunar sightings. Abrabanel maintains that this approach is entirely wrong-headed, as the computational method had always predominated (having been divinely revealed to Moses at the time of the Exodus), physical sightings being merely secondary. He explains that, whilst the Sages did utilise lunar sightings for sanctification of the new month (as is evident from the Mishnah), they invariably bolstered this by recourse to their own independent and highly accurate mathematical calculations.<sup>723</sup> Hence, as expressly recorded in the Mishnah, R. Gamaliel possessed astronomical tables and images of the lunar phases and possible positions, and appearances, of the moon, which he would exhibit to witnesses to check whether their sightings conformed to what he knew was astronomically correct.<sup>724</sup>

Abrabanel's assault upon the Karaites in this area, being very extensive and somewhat repetitive, is unsuitable for full citation here, but certain particularly graphic passages

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<sup>722</sup> This claim is novel, original to Abrabanel, and contrary to the Talmudic evidence. The conventional rabbinic view is, that in biblical and *mishnaic* times, the sightings method was paramount, and astronomical computation merely a complementary adjunct. Only after the almost total cessation of organised religious life in Palestine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, rendering continuation of the sightings method impossible, was this replaced by astronomical computation. Notably, Abrabanel is, paradoxically, willing to employ untraditional arguments in defence of tradition.

<sup>723</sup> Mishnah: Rosh ha-Shanah 1, 2 &3:1.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid. 2:8.

may usefully be selected to convey the flavour of his polemic.<sup>725</sup> Especially interesting is his demonstration that the Karaite position is not only anti-traditional, but also expressly anti-scriptural, as is evident from the excerpt below.<sup>726</sup> He thus takes the battle to the Karaites on their own ground – a clever tactic, previously employed most effectively by the Karaites' first major Rabbanite adversary, Saadia Gaon. Abrabanel writes:

(17) ‘... *The Karaite sages have spoken most disparagingly* (lit. broadened their mouths)...*against the Israelite sages because of their sanctification of the New Moon by computation..., as they say that the Pentateuch ordained that one should sanctify the New Moon by (means of) sighting, and that it was in this connection* (that Scripture stated): “*This month shall be to you the head of months...*”<sup>727</sup>

‘... *And (they allege), if God ordained that they should sanctify the new month by sighting of the New Moon, and this was the original custom in Israel when they resided on their land, how could it have entered their (the Rabbanite) sages' minds to... nullify the pentateuchal ordinance regarding sighting, and fix the months arbitrarily by computation, to the point where they declared that, in the absence of the great Bet Din, the sightings method is rendered obsolete...did not all Israel until R. Gamaliel's* <sup>728</sup> *time fix (the months) through lunar sightings?...*

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<sup>725</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 93-96.

<sup>726</sup> See I Samuel 20:5.

<sup>727</sup> Exodus 12:1.

<sup>728</sup> A 1st century *mishnaic* sage.

*'... Now, since these arguments... appear in the words of their commentators... it is... appropriate to answer them with words of peace and truth<sup>729</sup> in light of the maxim "Answer a fool according to his folly!"'*<sup>730</sup>

*'...Accordingly... the essence of this commandment is not that they (the Israelites) should sanctify the new month by sighting... but that... Nisan should be the first of the months of the year.<sup>731</sup> For what difference would it make to the Holy One... whether they sanctify it through (the testimony of) two witnesses, who often utter falsehood...or through (astronomical) computation, (the accuracy of) which is indisputable?*

*'...It is erroneous for these men... to have stated that in the Land of Israel, they only sanctified (the month) through sighting; for... David said to Jonathan (I Samuel 20:5): "... Tomorrow is the New Moon..." – whence did David know that tomorrow was the New Moon unless they fixed it by computation? - for the moon might be invisible and they would not (be able to) fix the next day as the New Moon!'*

*'...Thus all Israel were accustomed to fix the months by computation, and to reconcile this with sightings, though computation constituted the primary (method)... For this, one may find express scriptural (proof) (I Chronicles 12:30): "And of the children of Issachar, who had understanding of times, to know what Israel should do..." – and*

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<sup>729</sup> See Esther 9:30. 'Peace and truth' fairly encapsulates Abrabanel's stance towards his opponents. He eschews mere polemic, preferring to persuade them, or at least his own readership, by logical arguments.

<sup>730</sup> Proverbs 26:5.

<sup>731</sup> Whilst this is undoubtedly a correct contextual understanding of Exodus 12:1, paradoxically the Talmudic sages did actually regard this verse as the source for the precept of 'Kiddush ha-Hodesh' ('sanctification of the new month'). Abrabanel here, as elsewhere, employs untraditional arguments to support tradition, this being one important feature distinguishing him from other exegetes.

*nothing requires... understanding for fixing times and seasons but (astronomical) computation...<sup>732</sup>*

*'...But the Karaites, to distance themselves from the ways of the Israelite sages, despised their wisdom... in the art of intercalation, and chose... the sighting method... but did not succeed (in this), for... they still need (to rely upon) tradition for the definitions of 'month' and 'year', and for how and when the sanctification takes place...'.*

*'... It is amazing how their sages' faces are not covered with embarrassment when they sanctify the New Moon in each (individual) location without mutual agreement between one location and another, so that the Karaites in... Israel sanctify one day, those in Damascus another, and those in Constantinople... (in yet another) – so that the inhabitants of one place eat leaven on (the day which is) Passover, and do work on (the day which is) the Day of Atonement elsewhere'.<sup>733</sup>*

Abrabanel evidently did not realise that, by his time (as the 15th century Karaite author Bashyazi informs us in ‘Aderet Eliyahu’), the Diaspora Karaites had already abandoned the sightings system and, for practical purposes, adopted the nineteen-year rabbinical lunar cycle traditionally introduced by the 4th century Patriarch Hillel II. Only the Palestinian Karaites still retained the ancient method.

Several early medieval Karaite authorities, like Daniel al-Kumisi and Sahl b. Mazliah,

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<sup>732</sup> Another instance of Abrabanel seeking to turn the Karaites' own most potent weapon, the biblical text itself, against them.

<sup>733</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 93-95.

dubbed the Rabbanite calendation system ‘*heshbon ha-kosemim*’ (‘sorcerers’ computations’).<sup>734</sup>

‘Aderet Eliyahu’, commenting on Zechariah 10:2, similarly refers to ‘the sorcerers, who have had false visions..., who adduce allusions in the erroneous (manner of) the exponents of “tradition” to sanctification (of the New Moon) through astronomical computation; and have acted likewise as regards (their interpretation of) “on the morrow of the Sabbath”’.<sup>735</sup>

Finally, Keter Torah, commenting upon Exodus 12, polemicises extensively against the Rabbanite calendrical system, referring to the Talmud, and endeavours to provide a reasoned defence of the official Karaite position.<sup>736</sup>

2.2 Besides the Karaites’ insistence on lunar sightings to determine the date of the new moon, they argued with the Rabbanites over calculation of the correct date of Pentecost. The relevant biblical verses (Leviticus 23:15-16), state:

‘And you shall count... from the morrow of the Sabbath, from the day that you bring the Omer wave-offering, seven complete weeks they shall be. Until the morrow of the seventh Sabbath, shall you count 50 days...’

The interpretation of this ambiguous verse constituted an ancient bone of contention between the Sadducees and the Pharisees (rabbinic Judaism’s spiritual ancestors). The

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<sup>734</sup> N.Wieder: The Judean Scrolls and Karaism (London, 1962) 210, fn.1, referring to extracts from al-Qumisi’s ‘Book of Precepts’ and from Sahl b.Mazliah cited by A. Harkavy: Studien u. Mitteilungen viii, 189 & 150.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid., citing Bashyazi: Aderet Eliyahu, 105b.

<sup>736</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Exodus (Ramleh, 1972) 51-55.

Sadducees interpreted the expression ‘the Sabbath’ literally, as meaning Saturday, the seventh day of the week, with the result that Pentecost would always fall on a Sunday. The Pharisees, however, contended that ‘the Sabbath’, in the overall context of the passage, meant ‘the day of rest’, and accordingly that the counting of the fifty days culminating in the Feast was to commence from the first day of Passover, a day on which work was expressly prohibited. Thus, according to them, Pentecost could fall on any day of the week. The Karaites, later, adopted the Sadducean position, and attacked the Rabbanites for perverting the plain words of Scripture.<sup>737</sup> Bashyazi’s son-in-law Kaleb Afendopolo, for example, writes, in connection with the date of Pentecost:

‘And of those differences ( we have with the Rabbanites), one is “the morrow of the Sabbath” which falls during the seven days of (eating) unleavened bread, in respect of which the fiftieth day thereafter is... the Feast of Weeks...’<sup>738</sup>

Another Karaite controversialist, Samuel Al-Magribi, who compiled a code of Karaite law and practice entitled ‘The Guide’ in 1434, adduced another argument in support of his co-religionists’ position:

‘No-one denies that this (phrase, “a Sabbath unto the Lord in all your dwellings”<sup>739</sup>) signifies the Sabbath in the sense in which the word is used in the Creation narrative, since biblical usage has transferred the word from the general meaning of a day of

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<sup>737</sup> The Karaite stance towards the Sadducees has always been ambivalent. Whilst adopting similar positions on legal issues, their theology far more closely resembles that of rabbinic Judaism.

<sup>738</sup> Wieder: The Judean Scrolls, 210, citing K.Afendopolo: Treatise ‘Asarah Ma’amarot’: MS Leiden, Warner 30/5 fol.210b.

<sup>739</sup> Leviticus 23:3.

abstention from work to the particular rest on the seventh day of Creation and of the subsequent seventh days of each week'.<sup>740</sup>

Similarly, Keter Torah on this passage declares:

‘... But the exponents of Tradition...said that “the morrow of the Sabbath” is the morrow of the first day of Passover, for if the “Sabbath of Creation” (the weekly Sabbath) were intended, it should have said “the Sabbath of the Passover”. However, we have explained... that we do not find a festival day being called “a Sabbath” – but as they could not rest easily with the Sabbath (here) being the (regular) weekly Sabbath, they said it meant a Festival. And they... adduced purported proofs that it is a Festival... but we have refuted them all, and claimed... that we find nowhere in Scripture that a festival day is called “Sabbath”...’<sup>741</sup>

He proceeds with numerous arguments based on biblical verses to refute the Rabbanite view, which spatial considerations preclude being reproduced here.<sup>742</sup>

The medieval rabbis vehemently upheld their own tradition, adducing numerous arguments in its favour. Abrabanel followed suit, arguing (albeit, characteristically, on an untraditional basis) thus:

**(18)** *Now, regarding the phrase “from the morrow of the Sabbath” – the first festival, i.e. that of Passover, is called “Shabbat”, just as the day of sounding the*

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<sup>740</sup> Nemoy: Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the Early Literature – trans. from Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew Sources with notes by L.Nemoy (New Haven & London, 1952) 215.

<sup>741</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Leviticus, 129.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid.130-131.

*horn is called “Shabbaton” – and since the first day of Passover marks the beginning of all the festivals, that day... is called “the Sabbath”, with the definitive [letter] “he”); for it is the initial (occasion of) cessation from work amongst the (cycle of) festivals. And “the morrow of the Sabbath” is not to be interpreted in accordance with... the erring Karaites, to mean the morrow of “the Sabbath of Creation”<sup>743</sup>, i.e. the first day of the week occurring after the waving of the Omer (sheaf); and likewise “... you shall count... from the morrow of the Sabbath”, (indicating) that the counting should commence from then...’*

[An elaborate reasoned defence of the Rabbanite position ensues].

He concludes:

*‘Thus we cannot deviate from the words of the... tradition the ancients received from Moses our Teacher... that “from the morrow of the Sabbath” is the sixteenth day of Nisan – and... the fifteenth... the first day of Passover, is called “a Sabbath”, because it is that day amongst the festivals on which work (first) ceases...’<sup>744</sup>*

Whilst Abrabanel was not alone in defending the Rabbanite position as to the correct date of Pentecost, none of the other commentators addressing the issue, besides Ibn Ezra, expressly mention the Karaites in this connection. Abrabanel’s frequent direct references to them demonstrate that Karaism, and its pernicious dangers, as he perceived them, were for him a very live issue. What presumably worried him most

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<sup>743</sup> ‘The Sabbath of Creation’ refers, in rabbinic parlance, to the weekly Sabbath. Thus the Karaites, like their Sadducean precursors, insisted that the counting of the days culminating in Pentecost must commence from the day immediately after the Sabbath falling during Passover.

<sup>744</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Leviticus, 130-131.

was the inevitable anarchy resulting from various sections of Jewry celebrating the Divinely ordained festivals at different times.<sup>745</sup>

### 2.3 The Manna in the Desert

Abrabanel refers, in his commentary on Exodus 16:14,<sup>746</sup> to ‘a certain Karaite’, where he cites Ibn Ezra’s mention, in his own commentary to Exodus 16:13,<sup>747</sup> of the view of Hiwi (al-Balkhi) that manna falling nightly in the desert is a purely natural phenomenon, not a miraculous heavenly gift.<sup>748</sup> Ibn Ezra there indeed unequivocally condemns Hiwi, applying to him the biblical execration: ‘May the name of the wicked rot!’,<sup>749</sup> Abrabanel reproduces this imprecation in his own commentary, using similar arguments in refutation of Hiwi to his predecessor’s. However, Ibn Ezra nowhere actually states that Hiwi was a Karaite, and it is now universally acknowledged by Jewish historians that he was not. He was actually a notorious 8th century Jewish sceptic, profoundly critical of *all* religious tradition and denounced by Rabbanites and Karaites alike. Israel Davidson draws attention to Saadia Gaon’s polemic against Hiwi, and makes it clear that his target was not only the Oral Law, but Scripture too, as a leading medieval Karaite authority, Kirkisani, attested that the (early) Karaite Abu Amran al-Taflisi had refuted him.<sup>750</sup> Abrabanel, many centuries later, understandably erred in believing Hiwi to have been a Karaite, as it was then virtually unprecedented for a sustained assault on Divine Revelation to emanate from an independent thinker, unaffiliated to any official sect. Clearly, from the fact that

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<sup>745</sup> To appreciate the theological importance of establishing a correct calendar, one need think only of the early medieval controversy within Christianity concerning the correct method for computation of the date of Easter, which almost split the Western Church.

<sup>746</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 137.

<sup>747</sup> Ibn Ezra: ‘Lengthy Commentary to Exodus’ II, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1977) 103.

<sup>748</sup> Balkh: Hiwi’s native city.

<sup>749</sup> Proverbs 10:7.

<sup>750</sup> I. Davidson: Saadia’s Polemic against Hiwi al-Balkhi: A Fragment from a Genizah MS. (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1915) 15, 20, 31.

Abrabanel, generally reliable in his references to extraneous philosophical/theological literature, erred so significantly regarding Hiwi's true provenance, his acquaintance with Karaite literature was *not* comprehensive. At any rate, this apparent reference to the Karaites may safely be discounted as spurious. For avoidance of doubt, it must be stressed that, although the Karaites were heavily fragmented, they all subscribed to the *theology* of rabbinic Judaism, except for the sanctity of the Oral Law.

#### 2.4 ‘An Eye for an Eye’

The Karaite position on the ‘*lex talionis*’ is well-known, corresponding to that of the ancient Sadducees.<sup>751</sup> The Pentateuch declares in several places that one depriving another of his eyesight is to lose his own eye (by judicial process), and the ‘*talio*’ similarly extends to other injured parts of the body.<sup>752</sup> Keter Torah comments: ‘...According to the verse’s plain meaning, it appears that no ransom may be exacted for bodily injuries, but an actual physical wound’ (must be inflicted upon the culprit).<sup>753</sup>

[An elaborate and complex discussion of the issue, discussing the Rabbanite views, ensues.]

The Oral Law expounded by the Pharisees and their direct spiritual descendants, the Talmudic sages, explicitly declared that these prescriptions should not be interpreted

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<sup>751</sup> B. Revel: ‘The Karaite Halakhah and its Relation to Sadducean, Samaritan and Philonian Halakhah’, in: Karaite Studies, ed. P. Birnbaum (N.Y., 1971) 56-57, citing Benjamin Nahavendi: ‘Mas’at Binyamin’, 2d; Ben Zuta (cited by Ibn Ezra to Exodus 21:24); Japheth b. Ali (MGWJ, XLI, 1897, 205); Hadassi (Alph.275 (104c)); Aaron b. Joseph (Sefer ha-Mivhar, Exod.42a); Aaron b. Elijah (Keter Torah, Ex. 71b,ff) *et al.*

<sup>752</sup> Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21.

<sup>753</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Exodus, 72.

literally, but understood as the court's imposition of monetary compensation to the value of the destroyed bodily limb.<sup>754</sup>

Although the Sadducees vanished soon after the destruction of the Second Temple and the Pharisaic position prevailed, the *lex talionis* issue came to the fore again with the rise of the Karaite sect in the 8th century. Their sages, repudiating the Talmudic view, insisted upon a literal interpretation of the relevant verses, and indeed presented some cogent arguments in support of their position, goading their contemporary Rabbanite counterparts, such as Saadia and Ibn Ezra, into producing logical refutations.<sup>755</sup> These, appearing in their respective commentaries to Exodus and Leviticus, and which were familiar to Abrabanel, are forceful, and became the standard Rabbanite stance on this issue.<sup>756</sup> Relying upon these, he observes:

(19) '*Indeed, the law relating to ‘an eye for an eye’ has already come (down to us) by tradition – that it is not to be taken literally; for if... a man’s eye should (actually) be put out for destroying that of his fellowman, it might frequently result in (the taking of) an eye and a life (in compensation) for (just) an eye – for if they were to extract a man’s eye... under the court’s auspices, he could die (in the process); accordingly he would be punished by (the loss of) an eye and of his life (in retribution) for only an eye – as the Gaon (Saadia) has argued, and as asserted by the author of the Kuzari,<sup>757</sup> against the Karaites, who stultify themselves in this regard’.*<sup>758</sup>

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<sup>754</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Bava Kamma 83b-84a.

<sup>755</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Exodus, 72-74.

<sup>756</sup> See Ibn Ezra: ‘Lengthy Commentary to Exodus’, II, 152 (on Exodus 21:24); Commentary to Leviticus, 91 (on Leviticus 24:19). In both instances, Ibn Ezra cites Saadia approvingly.

<sup>757</sup> J. Ha-Levi: Kuzari: English trans. from ‘Ha-Kuzari ha-Meforash’ (Israel, 2000) 150-151.

<sup>758</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 206.

It is surprising that Abrabanel chooses to cite Judah ha-Levi's non-exegetical 'Kuzari', rather than Ibn Ezra's commentary, which was familiar to him and which he cites frequently elsewhere. Perhaps he felt that his readers needed to be informed of the position of the Kuzari, a philosophical work, on the issue, which was less well-known than Ibn Ezra's commentary.

#### 2.4.1 Do Abrabanel and Ibn Ezra partially adopt Karaite Exegesis?

Attention should here be drawn to one particular point - where Ibn Ezra, deviating from the Talmud, advances an opinion in line with the Karaite position, and Abrabanel follows suit. What should happen in a case where a man who has injured another fails to pay the monetary compensation duly imposed upon him by the court (presumably through wilful refusal)? Ibn Ezra declares, in his observations on Leviticus 24:19 (where the *lex talionis* is reiterated):

'For the explanation of all these cases (mentioned in the previous verses) is that he (the perpetrator of the damage) has a ransom imposed upon him, and if he fails to pay it, it is appropriate to extract his eye'.<sup>759</sup>

Similarly, Abrabanel, commenting on the identical passage, declares:

*'If someone inflicts a blemish upon his fellowman, so shall it be done to him' – albeit not on his body, but merely through monetary compensation – however, should he not make payment, then "just as he has inflicted a blemish upon (another) man, so shall it be inflicted upon him", corporeally'*<sup>760</sup>

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<sup>759</sup> Ibn Ezra: Commentary to Leviticus, 91.

Abrabanel does not cite Ibn Ezra's corresponding view here, but conceivably adopted it from him. Abrabanel does, after all, frequently fail to mention his sources. It is equally likely, however, that he reached his view independently, since both Ibn Ezra and Abrabanel, as thoroughgoing exponents of the '*P'shat*', would have been struck by the graphic dual reiteration in the Leviticus verses of the general law already promulgated in Exodus:

'And if a man inflicts a blemish upon his fellowman, as he has done, so shall it be done to him' (Lev 24:19); (and again) '...as he has inflicted a blemish upon a man, so it shall be inflicted (lit. given) upon him' (v.20).

To my knowledge, Ibn Ezra and Abrabanel are the only two rabbinic commentators expressing this view, which ostensibly appears to represent a shift towards the Karaite position demanding *talio* in all instances of bodily injury.

However, it would, I believe, be erroneous to suggest that Abrabanel (or indeed Ibn Ezra) were influenced by the Karaite exegesis, or sympathised with it. It is far more likely, given their open antagonism to Karaite views elsewhere, that the true reason for their novel interpretation was that traditional rabbinic exegesis simply failed to address the possibility that one who physically assaults another, resulting in the loss of a limb, might refuse to compensate his victim, or, alternatively, had not the wherewithal to do so. Would it be just to acquit such an individual altogether? It accordingly must have seemed reasonable for the Pentateuch to have legislated for

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<sup>760</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Leviticus, 151.

such a contingency too, and Abrabanel and Ibn Ezra could neatly explain the apparently superfluous reiteration of the penal clauses in Leviticus by postulating that they applied to the recalcitrant, or perhaps even impecunious, aggressor.

#### 2.4.2 Internal Karaite Divisions

Before leaving this vexed topic, it is interesting to examine exactly how Keter Torah deals with the Leviticus passage. He writes:

‘... There is a division of opinion between the exponents of Tradition who said that he (the perpetrator of any personal injury) is not dealt a bodily wound, but pays compensation, and adduced parallels... explained elsewhere... and the exponents of the biblical text (i.e. the Karaites) (who) said that it means literally a wound... and they too have adduced proofs.

‘... Some (Karaites) draw a distinction, that where there was intent to harm, he (the perpetrator) suffers bodily injury (as punishment), but where there was no (such) intent, then... he pays only monetary compensation (the verse [Lev.24:19] ‘Thus shall be done to him’<sup>761</sup> applying here in a non-corporeal sense’).<sup>762</sup>

Intriguingly, the Karaites were internally divided on this issue; this in itself did not trouble them, as they had always permitted each individual to interpret the biblical text independently, by the light of reason. However, it should here be appreciated that,

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<sup>761</sup> In contrast to the succeeding verse (Lev. 24:20), expressed in harsher terms: ‘Thus shall it be inflicted upon him’.

<sup>762</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Leviticus, 137.

amongst the Rabbanites too, we have Abrabanel and Ibn Ezra adopting a maverick stance, that in *some* instances, it *is* appropriate to inflict bodily injury by way of *talio*.

## 2.5 ‘You shall not Boil a Kid in its Mother’s Milk’

In his commentary to Exodus 23:19, the first of the three places in the Pentateuch where this prohibition is mentioned, Abrabanel mentions that the Karaites had developed a very different interpretation of this enigmatic prohibition from that of the Talmud.<sup>763</sup> There it is not understood literally, but extended enormously in scope so as to forbid the cooking, or eating, of all ritually clean animals’, or birds’, flesh together with animal milk, or milk derivatives, or deriving any benefit therefrom.<sup>764</sup>

According to Abrabanel, the Karaites understood these verses as constituting a prohibition on a newly-born firstborn lamb, kid or calf continuing to receive nourishment from its mother’s milk once seven days had elapsed from its birth. Henceforth, it had to be dedicated as a sacrifice to God. Thus the Karaites connected ‘you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk’ to the ostensibly independent commandment in Leviticus 22:27:

‘When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain under its mother for seven days; and from the eighth day onward, it shall be acceptable for a fire-offering to the Lord’.

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<sup>763</sup> Also Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21.

<sup>764</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Hullin 115b.

Abrabanel repudiates this interpretation as totally anti-traditional. He notes, first, that the Karaites, arbitrarily and without any textual warrant, interpreted the prohibition on boiling a kid in its mother's milk as applicable solely to *firstborn* animals. He explains, neutrally, that they understood the Hebrew word '*te'vashel*', occurring in the text, to mean not 'boiling', but 'ripening', (a usage encountered in Genesis 40:10). In other words, it is intended to set a time limit on a particular natural process. He further observes that the Karaites failed to explain why the prohibition is reiterated thrice in the Pentateuch, whereas, according to the rabbis, it reflects three separate prohibitions - cooking, eating and deriving benefit. It is worth quoting Abrabanel's relevant comment in full, to illustrate his uncompromising approach:

(20) *'... The Karaite sages have written, regarding the reason for (the prohibition) 'lo tevashel g'di', that the blossom should not become mingled with the roots, i.e. that the firstborn should not suck from its mother's milk after... seven days; but that from the eighth day (onwards), you must bring it (as a sacrifice); and the expression 'bishul' indicates a time-limit, as (we find in the phrase) 'Its clusters ripened'.<sup>765</sup> Now according to this interpretation, this precept would apply exclusively to the firstborn; but since we see this precept reiterated... thrice in the Pentateuch, commonsense tells us that the way our Sages... have received it (by tradition) is the absolute truth, upon which it is appropriate to rely, and (all) other thoughts are (but) vanity and falsehood'.<sup>766</sup>*

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<sup>765</sup> Genesis 40:10.

<sup>766</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 218. Interestingly, this interpretation is not the only one advanced by the Karaites. This is hardly surprising, in view of the terse wording of the biblical text, and of the fact, noted above, that the Karaites were never a homogeneous sect. They accorded each individual the right to interpret Scripture independently, if guided by intrinsic faith in God and the light of reason. Such an approach was anathema to the Rabbis.

Abrabanel's ultimate appeal to 'commonsense' here is significant. He is no mere dogmatist, but a rationalist who believes that tradition is capable of support through logical argument.<sup>767</sup>

## 2.6 ‘A Memorial of *Teru’ah*: ‘A Day of *Teru’ah* it shall be for you’

Abrabanel cites the Karaites yet again in his extensive discussion of the festival of Rosh ha-Shanah and its rituals. The Pentateuch is exceedingly brief regarding this festival, declaring merely that work is prohibited, special sacrifices are to be offered, and that it is to be a day of '*Teru’ah*'. The Talmudic sages interpreted the key word '*Teru’ah*' to refer to the blowing of the *Shofar* (horn). Abrabanel notes, however, that the Karaites rejected this interpretation, insisting that '*Teru’ah*' here meant the communal 'raising of voices' in praise of God. It is instructive to examine the way Abrabanel deals with this issue, dismissing what he deems their misguided view.

(21) *... The Teru’ah of which Scripture speaks in connection with this day is the blowing of the horn, unlike the words of the erring Karaites, that the ‘Teru’ah’... is the praising... of the Lord, as in the verse “and all the people shouted with a great cry in praise”; for we only find (the expressions) ‘Teki’ah’ and ‘Teru’ah’ - in the context of festival days - used in relation to (the sounding of) silver trumpets<sup>768</sup> ...and this (the Karaite interpretation) is manifestly erroneous, for...regarding what Scripture*

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<sup>767</sup> Without wishing to press the comparison too far, Abrabanel's rationalistic approach to internal heresy has its Christian parallel in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Bishop Reginald Pecock, a controversial figure who attacked the Lollards, also biblical literalists like the Karaites, in similar fashion. See C. Oman: *The Political History of England* 4 (1906; rep. N.Y. 1969) 377.

<sup>768</sup> Abrabanel's argument here is that since on all other festivals and the New Moon, instrumental music accompanies the sacrificial rites, rather than mere songs of praise, this case should be no different. He then demonstrates why the '*Teru’ah*' mentioned in connection with the New Moon of the seventh month (Rosh ha-Shanah), must be with the *Shofar*, rather than silver trumpets.

says: “*And all the people shouted*”, the verse (itself) immediately clarifies that this was (in vocal) praise (of God), by saying: (with) “*a great Teru’ah and praise*”. But here, in this (passage), where praise... is not mentioned, it is not appropriate so to interpret “*a day of Teru’ah it shall be for you*” – for... the praising...(of God) occurred on all the festivals - so why would Scripture speak about this (festival) in particular as ‘*a day of Teru’ah*’ (praise)?...<sup>769</sup>

Keter Torah writes on this verse:<sup>770</sup>

‘The Rabbanites drew an analogy between the Day of Trumpeting and the Day of Atonement preceding the Jubilee Year, of which it is written: “Then shall you sound the horn of trumpeting in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, on the Day of Atonement...” (Lev. 25:9). They say that just as this trumpeting was performed with a horn, so too must that... on the Day of Trumpeting.... We have already explained that it really means raising of the voice, combined with the sound of the horn, as it is written; “For thou hast heard... the sound of the horn, the trumpeting of war” (Jer.4:19). The day of trumpeting, therefore, signifies merely raising of the voice in song and praise... as there is no mention of a horn in connection with it...’<sup>771</sup>

Again, Abrabanel is anxious to denounce the Karaite interpretation, which he has evidently portrayed accurately, as to the precise manner of celebration of the

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<sup>769</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Leviticus, 138.

<sup>770</sup> Nemoy: Karaite Anthology: Excerpts, 173.

<sup>771</sup> There is seemingly some confusion within Keter Torah’s comments. On the one hand, he states that ‘*teru’ah*’ signifies raising of the voice, joined with the sound of the horn, but on the other, concludes that the ‘day of *teru’ah*’ signifies *only* the chanting of praise on that day. Conceivably, however, he wishes to distinguish between the verse in Jeremiah, where both expressions are used, and that in Leviticus, where only the one occurs.

festivals.<sup>772</sup> As a biblical expert, he knew that Scripture indeed contained numerous passages where the word ‘*teru’ah*’, or its verbal equivalent ‘*le-hari’ah*’, unequivocally meant ‘shouting in acclamation’; accordingly, he had to demonstrate, by citing other instances where this word undoubtedly signified blowing the horn, that that was, contextually, the correct interpretation here. This supports the idea suggested above that his prime concern was to ensure that the rabbinic *halakhah* was upheld universally throughout Jewry, which he felt could only be accomplished if buttressed by solid theoretical underpinnings. Further examples evidencing this stance will presently be provided.

Of further interest in this connection is the sheer novelty of Abrabanel’s approach. No rabbinic exegete had ever tackled the issue before in this way, nor had the Talmud itself. Whilst both the Talmudic sages and later commentators had acknowledged that there was no explicit biblical mention of the *Shofar*, as such, in connection with this festival, their problem had been to prove that the requisite musical instrument was indeed the *Shofar* rather than the silver trumpets ordained elsewhere in Scripture<sup>773</sup> to be sounded on the festivals and the New Moon.<sup>774</sup> There was no suggestion that the alternative to blowing the *Shofar* was communal chanting. Apparently, therefore, such an interpretation was not Sadducean, but entirely original to the Karaites. Abrabanel thus found himself here on fresh ground.

## 2.7 The Four Species on Tabernacles

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<sup>772</sup> B. Revel: ‘The Karaite Halakhah’, 78, citing Hadassi, Alph 225; 364 (136a), Keter Torah to Lev.67and Aderet Eliyahu, 48a, as unanimously interpreting ‘*teru’ah*’ as loud vocal praise of God.

<sup>773</sup> Numbers 10:10.

<sup>774</sup> See Babylonian Talmud: Rosh ha-Shanah 34a; Ibn Ezra to Leviticus 23:24, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook, III (Jerusalem, 1977) 86.

This is yet another instance of Karaite deviation from standard rabbinic practice in observance of the festival rites, for which Abrabanel severely berates them. The relevant biblical verse mandating the taking of four plant species on the Feast of Tabernacles reads:

'And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a goodly tree, branches of palms, and boughs of thick-leaved trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days'. (Leviticus 23:40).

### 2.7.1 Karaite Interpretations

The Karaites understood this verse as intrinsically connected with the injunction in the adjacent verse<sup>775</sup> to dwell in booths during the festival, and as providing instructions for their construction and adornment.<sup>776</sup> Thus, at least according to their mainstream view, the species of plants mentioned here did not constitute an independent precept.

Keter Torah observes:

'There is an argument amongst the (Karaite) sages as to whether this 'taking'(of the species) is with the hand, in accordance with the view of the exponents of tradition, or to construct a booth with them... the second group are supported by what is written in Nehemiah...',<sup>777</sup>

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<sup>775</sup> Leviticus 23:42.

<sup>776</sup> Revel: The Karaite Halakhah, 79, citing, besides Keter Torah, several other sources confirming that the 'Four Species' are for construction of the booths, e.g. Hadassi, Alph.168 (64b), Sefer ha- Mivhar, Lev. 43a, and Aderet Eliyahu, 47b (who in turn cites Japheth b. Ali).

<sup>777</sup> Ibid.

The Karaites additionally differed with the rabbis as to the precise identities of the species concerned, their biblical description being somewhat vague. However, the Karaites were also internally divided regarding the correct interpretation of the text. It is instructive to examine the diffuse manner in which Keter Torah tackles the issue:

‘... Others interpret “fruit of goodly trees” as a transposition of “goodly fruit trees”.

‘... Daniel al-Kumisi said that the fruit of goodly trees is more suitably applied as a synonym for ‘branches of palm-trees’, as it is written: “Thy stature is like to a palm-tree” (Canticles 7:8).

‘... It would seem that this verse does not refer to the making of the booth, and the fact that the Book of Ezra ordains the making of the booth from some of these kinds of leaves does not indicate that the two phrases are synonymous.<sup>778</sup> Rather, inasmuch as the Ezra passage deals with the booth, it had to say: “Take the leaves of such-and-such species of trees”; on the other hand, the pentateuchal passage, being unconnected with the making of the booth, did not need to say “leaves of such-and-such species of trees”, but... “branches of palm-trees,... boughs of thick-leaved trees, and willows of the brook” (Lev.23:40).<sup>779</sup>

It is evident from this last paragraph that Keter Torah is back-tracking, veering towards the Rabbanite position. However, he now proceeds to effect a compromise

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<sup>778</sup> The actual reference is to Nehemiah 8:14. This is, however, not an error by Keter Torah, as an ancient *masoretic* tradition, common to both Rabbanites and Karaites, considered Ezra and Nehemiah one book, written on a single scroll. The current division into two separate books is Christian.

<sup>779</sup> Nemoy: Karaite Anthology, 179-180.

between the conflicting verses in the Pentateuch and in ‘Ezra’,<sup>780</sup> in an attempt ultimately to uphold the Karaite stance:

‘... Clearly... the booth should be constructed of something similar to the species mentioned in the account of the making of the booths in... Ezra, in the verse: “Go out to the mountains” (Neh. 8:15). Evidently also, the meaning is not that the booth must be made only out of all these species alone, but... that it may be built out of anything else, provided it does not have an unpleasant odour; the species mentioned in... Ezra were simply those available at that time and place’.<sup>781</sup>

The entire discussion appears somewhat confused, reflecting the internal divisions within the Karaite camp.

### 2.7.2 Abrabanel’s Response.

Once again, Abrabanel perceived in the Karaite practice a fundamental threat to the authority of the *halakhah*, and hence to the core of living Judaism. He polemicises elaborately, yet forcefully, cleverly exploiting the internal Karaite divisions:<sup>782</sup>

(22) *‘Now... the erring Karaites interpreted (the verse): ‘... on the fifteenth day of the seventh month’, etc., as... clarifying with what (materials) they should make the booths; and in this regard, it states: ‘... You shall take unto yourselves’, i.e. they should take the materials specified... to construct the booths, as is written in Ezra: “Go out to the mountains, and bring olive-branches... branches of oil trees... myrtle*

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<sup>780</sup> Viz. Nehemiah: see fn.778.

<sup>781</sup> Nemoy: Karaite Anthology, 182-183.

<sup>782</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Leviticus, 147-148. The remainder of this lengthy polemic is omitted due to spatial considerations

*branches... palm-branches and branches of thick-leaved trees, to make booths, as is written” (in the Pentateuch), etc.; but the (method of) construction of the booths is not mentioned in the Pentateuch.*

*‘And, as the phrase ‘the fruit of a goodly tree’ was hard for them (to interpret), they said it means ‘a fruit-bearing tree’, and that this is why the word ‘kapot’ is written defectively (‘kapat’), as it is the branch that is meant, not the fruit – and that ‘kapot temarim’ is (actually) identical with the ‘goodly tree’.<sup>783</sup> Or, alternatively, that the ‘goodly tree’ is that mentioned in Ezra - olive-leaves...*

*‘...They interpreted the expression ‘ve-hagotem’ (‘you shall observe as a festival’) to mean... that one should circle around in the House of God (on those days) with song and praise...<sup>784</sup>*

*‘But this is manifestly erroneous, for (several) reasons:*

*First, if ‘... you shall take... on the first day’ was genuinely associated with the (making of) booths, the verses would... contain a superfluous element. Secondly, they expounded ‘...You shall take for yourselves on the first day’ to mean... on the first day alone – so how can they (simultaneously) interpret it to refer to the construction of the booths, when the festival... is for seven days, not just one day..? Thirdly, how can they interpret ‘You shall take...’ as connected with the making of the booths...? - for... Scripture has already stated: “On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the*

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<sup>783</sup> Hence, in accordance with this Karaite interpretation of the verse, the number of species required for construction of the booths is not four, but three.

<sup>784</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Leviticus, 134.

*Festival of Tabernacles (of) seven days to the Lord...” etc. – and concluded (enumeration of) the festival precepts by stating: “These are the appointed seasons of the Lord”.... How can it therefore subsequently revert to explain with what (materials) they should make the booths? Scripture should merely have ordained that they should make the booths and reside in them for seven days, whatever they are made of... Fourthly, if Scripture came to clarify the plants and... leaves (to be used) to make the booths, it should have stated, as it does in Ezra, “Go out to the mountains and bring olive-leaves to make booths” – why does it specify four species... not (identical to) those (mentioned) in Ezra?*

*‘...Besides... fruit... is unsuitable (material) for making a booth...  
But they pervert the (meaning of) the verse: “the fruit of a goodly tree” by stating that it means a fruit-bearing tree - that the precept concerned the tree, not the fruit...’*

*‘Ultimately, all this is a...falsification of the verses, and one must marvel at their sages – surely they knew that amongst the Judeans who came to build the Second Temple... were remnants of the First Temple era; and... they performed the commandments in the Second Temple strictly as they had customarily (done) in the First.... And as the booth... the palm-branch and the other species taken with it, each constitute a separate precept, they continued the identical usage in the Second Temple, making the circuits... during the festival days with the four species... throughout the Second Temple era, as Joseph b. Gurion (Josippon) has recorded... The mishnaic sages did likewise... they did not introduce this precept at the end of the Second Temple (era) or during the exile, but observed the precepts in accordance with*

*the correct understanding of the verses, and as they had done in the Temple throughout the Second... and... First Temple eras.*

*'... This... proves their (the Karaite) error, in their deviation from... the authentic tradition and... the mishnaic sages – "blessed be He who has made choice of them and their teaching"'.<sup>785</sup>*

Abrabanel is ready to go to enormous lengths to refute the Karaites, point by point; he does so not only by employing sophisticated dialectical arguments based upon a close comparative analysis of the relevant biblical texts, but also by an appeal to ancient Jewish history. Notably, too, he invokes Josephus (Josippon) in support of his stance. To abridge the above citation would detract from the subtlety and cumulative force of his arguments. The sheer wealth and breadth of Abrabanel's erudition is evident here, and his concluding invocation of Divine blessing upon the *mishnaic* sages clearly demonstrates his supreme reverence for them.

## 2.8 Interpretations of Specific Biblical Words and Phrases

As an advocate of '*P'shat*', Abrabanel was naturally concerned with the precise meaning of every word in the Bible, and frequently throughout his commentaries he discusses the meaning of unusual words by reference to their Hebrew roots. However, as his primary interest did not lie in grammar *per se*, he was content to rely for grammatical matters largely upon his able predecessors in the field, e.g. Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra and Radak. He was also sufficiently astute to appreciate that the Karaites, though bitter theological opponents, were experts on grammar, which they cultivated

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<sup>785</sup> See Mishnah: Avot 6:1.

as a vital tool for establishing the true meaning of biblical words and phrases.<sup>786</sup> Accordingly, in the comparatively rare instances where the traditionalist interpretations failed to satisfy him and he had also exhausted the suggestions of his Rabbanite grammatical mentors, he turned to the works of Karaite scholars for enlightenment. This testifies to his intellectual honesty – he evidently endorsed Maimonides' philosophical principle ‘Seek the truth from whatever source it comes’.<sup>787</sup> Abrabanel carefully distinguished between issues with *halakhic* ramifications, where Karaite views were invariably unacceptable, and neutral matters, such as straightforward interpretations of biblical words and phrases in narrative contexts, without implications for daily religious life and practice.

I have traced two such instances, both in connection with Abrabanel's interpretation of particular words and phrases in the Book of Numbers. The first case (Numbers 21:30), concerns the correct interpretation of the unusual word ‘*va-niram*’, appearing in that verse. The general context of the passage is that of a poetic description of the conquest of Moabite cities and strongholds, initially by the Amorites and then by the Israelites. Abrabanel comments:

‘... *Regarding the phrase ‘va-niram – avad Heshbon’ad Divon’ – some explain the word ‘nir’ as connoting kingship, as it is written (I Kings 11:36): ‘in order that there shall be a kingdom (‘nir’) for David’.*<sup>788</sup>...*But in the Karaite commentaries, I have seen that here they interpreted ‘va-niram’ as associated (grammatically) with the*

<sup>786</sup> Modern scholarship, from documents found in the Cairo Genizah, generally maintains that the foremost Tiberian masorete, Aaron b. Moses ben Asher, whose pentateuchal codex, fully vowelled and punctuated, was adopted by Maimonides, was a Karaite.

<sup>787</sup> Maimonides: Introduction to ‘Shemonah Peraqim’ (Preface to his Commentary to Tractate Avot) printed in: Babylonian Talmud, ed. ‘Pe’er ha-Torah’ (Jerusalem, 1967) 16, 2.

<sup>788</sup> See Rashi *ad loc.* According to this interpretation, the correct vowelling of the word in question is ‘*ve-niram*’, not ‘*va-niram*’.

*phrase ‘va-yoru ha-yorim’ [‘And the archers shot’] (at King Josiah) (*II Chronicles 35:23*)’.<sup>789</sup>*

Abrabanel proceeds with other, alternative interpretations of ‘*va-niram*’, but, significantly, reveals that he has directly consulted Karaite commentaries in his search for the correct meaning of this word. He records their interpretation neutrally, as one of several legitimate alternatives.

Keter Torah interestingly adduces, as equally valid alternatives, both interpretations offered by Abrabanel,<sup>790</sup> though ascribing only the second to the Karaites, probably because the first appears also in rabbinic exegesis.<sup>791</sup>

It is, moreover, significant that Abrabanel chooses to cite the Karaite commentators whilst having available Ibn Ezra’s commentary on this verse, which mentions the Karaite interpretation as one of two alternatives. Seemingly, therefore, Abrabanel consulted Karaite exegesis, either out of sheer intellectual curiosity, to ascertain whether Ibn Ezra was quoting accurately, or to double-check on the ‘*P’shat*-type’ interpretations of his Rabbanite predecessors.

The second instance I have traced of Abrabanel citing Karaite exegesis on the meaning of a biblical phrase occurs in Numbers 25:4, which reads:

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<sup>789</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Numbers, 112.

<sup>790</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Numbers, 66.

<sup>791</sup> See fn.788.

‘And the Lord said to Moses: “Take all the leaders of the people and hang them up before the Lord against the sun – and the burning anger of the Lord will withdraw from Israel” ’.

The difficulty involved here is that its context is that of the entire Israelite nation succumbing to the worship of a Moabite deity. No mention is made of the *leaders* of the people themselves participating in this idolatry or encouraging the people to do so. It thus seems contrary to Divine justice that they alone should be executed.

Abrabanel initially cites Targum Onkelos, who rendered the verse as meaning that Moses was to take all those amongst the leaders who were guilty in that regard, and hang them publicly.<sup>792</sup> He continues:

‘... *The Karaite sages said: “Take all the leaders of the people”* (means) that he should take the leaders with him (to assist him) in executing justice on those who had become attached (to the idol) – and they interpreted (the phrase) “and hang them up” as referring to those who had been (guilty of) such attachment’.<sup>793</sup>

Again, we have the strange phenomenon of Abrabanel turning to the Karaites for enlightenment, whilst bypassing the Rabbanite exegete Ibn Ezra, who offers the identical explanation: ‘“And hang them up” - the meaning is “those who (*actually*) became attached” ’ i.e. not the leaders of the people.<sup>794</sup>

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<sup>792</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Numbers, 127.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid.

<sup>794</sup> Ibn Ezra: Commentary to Numbers, III, ed. Mosad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1977) 190.

Keter Torah's comment on this verse, though somewhat obscure, can certainly be understood in a manner consistent with what Abrabanel took it to mean.<sup>795</sup>

Stranger still is the fact that, in this instance, Abrabanel proceeds to offer his own, preferred interpretation, that it is indeed the leaders who deserve to be hanged, as they should have acted to prevent their flock succumbing to idolatry, but failed to do so. This begs the question as to why he bothers to cite a Karaite interpretation not only identical to Ibn Ezra's, but which he ultimately has no intention of adopting!

We may conjecture that Abrabanel regarded the Karaites as serious and reliable interpreters of Scripture, albeit only insofar as concerned its narrative sections, which had no bearing upon *halakhah* and daily religious practice. This view, while plausible, begs the question as to why he does not cite them more frequently – he indeed fails to mention them altogether throughout the narrative Book of Genesis! Perhaps he simply could not find any genuine ambiguities there.

## 2.9 The Law of Inheritance

The basic principles governing the Israelite law of inheritance are adumbrated in Numbers 27:7-11 & 35:1-10. Fundamentally, inheritance passes through the male line of descent, except where there are no male descendants and females are accordingly permitted to inherit instead. However, the biblical text did not cover all possible contingencies, and accordingly much Talmudic amplification was required. An entire chapter of a Talmudic tractate<sup>796</sup> was indeed devoted to this subject, as one of immense practical importance. The Karaites, repudiating the Oral Law, had developed

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<sup>795</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Numbers, 39.

<sup>796</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Bava Batra Ch. 8.

their own rules of inheritance, based upon the scriptural text and their own analogical reasoning, and accordingly found themselves the butt of Abrabanel's further assault.<sup>797</sup> He observes:

(23) *'...For (halakhically) the mother's family is not called 'family'; and here the Karaite sages have erred... relying for their stance on the case of Naomi, who sold the field belonging to her son Mahlon after his death.<sup>798</sup> First, they have written that one's maternal brothers inherit (just) like paternal brothers. Secondly (they claim) that a mother inherits as heir to (her) son, just as a father does, and that she precedes the (deceased son's) brothers in (the right of) inheritance, as does the father...'*

*'Thirdly... that, where a father and a mother are both alive at (the time of) their son's death, and he has no issue, his father and mother share his inheritance equally...'*

*'... They have said all this because they have accepted that the mother's family is (biblically) called 'a family', just as the father's is; but... this is an error manifest from the biblical verses, for God commanded that the land be apportioned to males... not to females at all, besides the daughters of Zelophehad (who inherited) through their father's 'power'... not to erase his name from his family.'*

*'...As a son is the authentic heir to his father's possessions, so is a father his son's authentic heir where he (the son) has no issue...; and his brothers inherit him only insofar as they constitute the father's issue...'*

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<sup>797</sup> See citations from Keter Torah appearing immediately below.

<sup>798</sup> See Ruth 4:3.

*'... (Regarding) a mother, just as her son is not deemed (part of) her family...so she does not inherit her son...'*

*'... One cannot adduce a (contrary) proof from Naomi, for perhaps the field (that she sold) belonged to her (in her own right) or her son had transferred it to her as a gift.'*<sup>799</sup>

This is an excellent example of Abrabanel's determination to utilise every available intellectual weapon to counter the Karaite stance on inheritance law, an area of immense practical importance. With customary thoroughness, he initially presents all the Karaite arguments, proceeding to demolish them in turn. Two particular points are noteworthy here; first, Abrabanel does not invoke the Talmud in defence of his position, but relies on the biblical text itself, and logical reasoning, believing that the Karaites would thus be compelled to take his challenge more seriously. Secondly, Abrabanel evidently does not allow himself to be beguiled by the ostensibly more humane and enlightened views of the Karaites in this matter – he adheres to the strict letter of the law as interpreted in the Talmud, which he in any case believes to conform to Scripture.<sup>800</sup>

However, we must still ascertain, as elsewhere, whether Abrabanel is accurately reflecting his opponents' views, and may accordingly turn to Keter Torah for verification of the Karaite position. Its author comments, on Numbers 27:

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<sup>799</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Numbers, 135-136.

<sup>800</sup> That the Karaites were not primarily motivated by humanitarian considerations in their biblical exegesis is plain from their insistence upon the literal interpretation of 'an eye for an eye'.

‘The (Karaite) sages are doubtful as to whether a mother (surviving her deceased son) inherits (his property) jointly with his father, or (next in line) after him, or (only) when all (the deceased’s) issue have perished... or whether she does not inherit her children at all, as the exponents of Tradition maintain.

‘It is impossible for her to have no right of inheritance whatsoever, because she (has the right to) bequeath an inheritance...

‘... “Where a man dies” – (Scripture here states that) a father bequeaths his inheritance to his son – just as a mother too may bequeath her inheritance to her son; and if the father can inherit his (deceased) son, so too can the mother... the context compels the conclusion that she inherits (her deceased son) jointly with the father; although, by the principles of inheritance, the male precedes the female, so that the mother should come after the father... we find one principle governing inheritances... anyone with a right to inheritance - his issue stands in his place...

‘...We find that Naomi inherited her sons, as it is stated: “Naomi has sold all that belonged to Elimelekh and... to Mahlon and Khilion” (Ruth 4:3)...

‘... It is preferable...to conclude that the father and mother should inherit jointly, rather than that the mother should inherit (only) after the father...

‘... If he (the deceased) has brothers, “You shall give his inheritance to his brothers”... and the brothers jointly with the sisters...<sup>801</sup>

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<sup>801</sup> Keter Torah: Commentary to Numbers, 83.

Evidently, Abrabanel has presented the Karaite position on inheritance law fairly, faithfully reproducing their citation of Naomi's case in the Book of Ruth in support of their stance. He presumably relied on Keter Torah for his information.

### 3. Conclusions

It is evident both from this instance and the many others adduced above that any suggestion that Abrabanel espoused Karaite positions is baseless. He indeed differs from most of his exegetical predecessors in being willing to give consideration to all views, including heretical ones, and cites Karaite ideas more extensively than any other traditional rabbinic exegete before or since. He builds upon Ibn Ezra's relatively cursory treatment of the subject, and both his presentation and refutation of Karaite views are far more extensive. As we have seen, however, his knowledge of contemporary Karaite practice was not wholly up-to-date,<sup>802</sup> nor was his acquaintance with their literature comprehensive.<sup>803</sup>

Abrabanel evidently regards Karaite biblical exegesis as a serious challenge to rabbinic tradition, as is clear from the inordinate lengths to which he goes to refute their views in so many different areas of Jewish law and practice. He fears that, should their ideology gain credence, this will inevitably lead to anarchy within Judaism. Like the contemporary representatives of Christian orthodoxy, Abrabanel views heresy with horror, and feels the need to combat it so as to preserve intact and undiluted what he deems the authentic ancestral faith. With this aim in mind, he

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<sup>802</sup> See p.283, where Abrabanel assumes that the Diaspora Karaites still universally rely on lunar sightings to establish the calendar.

<sup>803</sup> See pp.288-289.

approaches his task with typical thoroughness, tackling the detailed Karaite arguments point-by-point.

He adopts a highly intellectual approach, representing the Karaites' ideology comprehensively and fairly, without ascribing to them views they did not actually hold. He also treats them with some deference, regularly referring to their authorities as 'Sages'. Moreover, he is no mere dogmatist, insisting on the supremacy of rabbinic tradition for its own sake, but invariably attempts to *prove* the vital necessity of reliance upon tradition, as encapsulated in the Oral Law, to supplement the Written Law's frequently obscure, unspecific and ambiguously-phrased prescriptions. Such attempts are frequently - though not exclusively - based upon reason, and occasionally upon history, rather than upon a simplistic appeal to tradition. He is willing to utilise novel, untraditional arguments to support tradition, as, for instance, in relation to the Jewish calendar. He occasionally also turns the Karaites' most potent weapon, the biblical text itself, against them, as amply illustrated by his exposition of the true meaning of the word '*Teru'ah*' and of the Four Species. He further displays considerable polemical skill by his oft-employed tactic of exploiting internal Karaite divisions.

He is, however, prepared to adopt Karaite views on religiously neutral issues such as the correct meanings of words and phrases in Scripture's *narrative* sections having no bearing on *halakhah*. He does so because he acknowledges that the Karaites' greatest strength lay in their close attention to the grammatical and contextual sense of Scripture. This clear distinction that Abrabanel makes between *halakhah* and narrative is evidently fundamental to his approach, though his very adoption of such a stance

was revolutionary, by the standards of his day. Ultimately, though, notwithstanding his remarkably bold approach, Abrabanel remains a faithful adherent, and eloquent exponent, of rabbinic tradition.

## Chapter Seven

### Race and Ethnicity in Abrabanel's Biblical Exegesis<sup>804</sup>

#### 1. General Introduction

Before commencing a detailed study of all references in Abrabanel's biblical commentaries to these issues, the way the concepts of race and ethnicity were understood in a medieval context must first be considered. This is important, as many contemporary authorities on this subject maintain that all current notions of race and ethnicity originated only in the 19th century, and if this view is correct, the present study would arguably be invalid, as attempting to super-impose modern concepts upon the medieval era.

Should I succeed in showing that, in respect of our period, certain markers of ethnic identity were stereotyped and viewed in a negative light, I shall then need to ascertain what relevant Jewish and/or non-Jewish sources, and general attitudes towards issues such as blackness of skin, would potentially have been available for Abrabanel, writing at the turn of the 16th century, to draw upon for his own discussions of these themes.

For such definitions, I refer initially to Benjamin Isaac's recent work entitled 'The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity'.<sup>805</sup> Although this does not purport to

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<sup>804</sup> Being fully aware of the sensitive nature of this topic, I attach the following disclaimer to this chapter:-

Any adverse views that may have been expressed on issues of race and ethnicity in Abrabanel's biblical commentaries, or those of any other exegetes cited in this study, or that may be inferred from them, which might appear to contemporary readers to be of a racist nature, are strictly a product of their own age. I dissociate myself from any such views in any event, and my discussion of them is conducted exclusively within their historical context and from an academic perspective.

<sup>805</sup> B.H. Isaac: *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004).

cover the medieval period, the object of my present study, it nonetheless serves a useful purpose in that any theories of racism emerging from the classical period may potentially have been adopted by the medievals. Furthermore, Isaac discusses modern-day definitions of racism, thus setting standards by which the precise position as regards the medieval and early modern periods can be assessed. It is accordingly to this work that I now briefly turn my attention.

### 1.1 Modern Definitions of Racism.

Isaac offers the following definition of Racism, which he deems the most satisfactory for an understanding of the ancient evidence:

‘An attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of people collective traits, physical, mental and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography’.<sup>806</sup>

This apparently constitutes a solid working definition for current purposes. Disappointingly, however, Isaac offers little of direct relevance to our theme, as he focuses upon classical antiquity, alluding only incidentally to the medieval era. Furthermore, he expressly states that a *systematic* discussion of attitudes towards black Africans is omitted from his study, ‘because blacks did not form much of a presence in the Greek and Roman worlds...and no country inhabited by blacks was

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<sup>806</sup> Ibid. 23.

ever part of the Greek and Roman empires'.<sup>807</sup> Regarding Blacks, he briefly cites the first century Roman savant Strabo as attributing the skin-colour and hair-texture of Ethiopians to scorching by the sun<sup>808</sup> – a neutral, factual perspective, echoed by his near-contemporary Pliny, in his *Naturalis Historia*.<sup>809</sup> Evidently, there is little material available here for medieval writers to draw upon.

Isaac indeed mentions the influence of classical theories about race on ‘early modern authors’, but for him, these commence only in the 18th century, far later than Abrabanel’s time.<sup>810</sup> He does, however, incidentally cite the views of a few of Abrabane’s close contemporaries, who, he claims, had inherited some of their ideas from Aristotle, e.g. Paracelsus (15th century), and Giordano Bruno (16th century). These notions, such as, for instance, that pygmies or American Indians had no souls and descended from another Adam, or were generated spontaneously from the earth, were regarded by the Church as blasphemous and heretical. Accordingly, I consider it unlikely that they would have influenced Abrabanel, who, like the Church, viewed life from a distinctly religious perspective.

Intriguingly, however, Isaac cites Frederickson’s observation that ‘sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain is critical to the history of western racism because its attitudes served as a kind of segue between the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the naturalistic racism of the modern era’.<sup>811</sup> Ostensibly, this observation is potentially relevant to the present study, though Abrabanel had left Spain in 1492,

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<sup>807</sup> Ibid. 49-50.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid. 80, citing Strabo 15.1.24 (696).

<sup>809</sup> Ibid. 80, citing Pliny, NH.2.80.189.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid. 8-14.

<sup>811</sup> Ibid.13, fn.32, citing Frederickson, Racism, 40-42.

before the start of the 16th century, it being only then that the notion of ‘*limpieza*’, (‘racial purity’), had firmly taken root there.

Thus nothing in Isaac’s work suggests that Abrabanel (a late medieval/early modern philosopher and theologian) would *necessarily* have imbibed any of the classical ideas from antiquity.

Various recent leading historians have argued, in a series of essays, not only that racism can be traced back to the attitudes of the ancient Greeks towards their Persian enemies, but also, most significantly for our purposes, that it was adopted, adjusted and reformulated by Europeans *right through* to the dawn of the Enlightenment.<sup>812</sup> There were Greek teachings on environmental determinism and heredity, medieval concepts of physiognomy, down to the crystallisation of attitudes to Indians, Blacks, Jews and Gypsies in the early modern era. Joseph Ziegler, in particular, notes that medieval writers made links between geography, physical appearance, complexion and character, and points out that while physiognomy might be viewed as an irrational belief, in the Middle Ages it played the role of a rational science.<sup>813</sup>

Bethencourt traces the development of racism from a Euro-centric viewpoint, with the key turning-point being oceanic exploration and the discovery of the Americas. He claims that European encounters with the native populations of the Americas, coupled

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<sup>812</sup> See M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac and J. Ziegler [Co-Eds.]: *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>813</sup> J. Ziegler: ‘Physiognomy, Science and Proto-Racism 1200-1500’ in: *The Origins of Racism in the West*, 182.

with the massive numbers of slaves being exported to the New World, built up the idea of white supremacy over peoples of all parts of the globe.<sup>814</sup>

I would observe, in connection with this, that although Abrabanel's biblical commentaries were primarily composed after the discovery of the New World, he never refers to it in his commentaries, and his ethnic views are evidently derived (leaving aside what he may have absorbed from ancient classical and medieval literary sources) from his experience of the Portuguese exploration of the African coast, seen in the context of the traditional rabbinic interpretations of relevant biblical passages.

2. More directly related to our topic, however, are the works by David Goldenberg entitled 'The Development of the Idea of Race: Classical Paradigms and Medieval Elaborations',<sup>815</sup> and 'The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam'.<sup>816</sup> These (*inter alia*) trace and record early Jewish and Christian views of Blacks, and their medieval developments. I consider these of greater relevance than the pagan, classical sources for the study of race and ethnicity in Abrabanel's exegetical writings, because, although he valued the classical literature of Greece and Rome highly, his own perspective was ultimately a religious one.

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<sup>814</sup> F. Bethencourt: Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 2013).

<sup>815</sup> Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University Collective Degradation; Slavery and the Construction of Race. Nov 7-8, 2003. Yale Univ., New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>816</sup> D.M. Goldenberg: The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Princeton, 2003) 111-128.

Goldenberg discourses lengthily on the theme of ‘The Curse of Ham’, but, perhaps surprisingly, speaks of it, insofar as early rabbinic literature is concerned, not only in the context of the curse laid by Noah upon his youngest son for revealing his nakedness, as would be expected, but also in connection with the sin traditionally committed by Ham by having chosen to copulate whilst in the ark! He cites the following passage appearing in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>817</sup> and its *midrashic* parallel.<sup>818</sup> He particularly emphasises Rashi’s comment on the Talmudic passage, which he claims was highly influential amongst later generations of learned Jews:

‘Three creatures transgressed (in the ark) – the raven, the dog, and Ham the son of Noah – and were punished.... Ham was punished in his skin’ (or, *per* the Palestinian Talmud, ‘in having his skin turn dark’<sup>819</sup>).

On the phrase, ‘Ham was punished in his skin’, Rashi tersely remarks: ‘In that Cush was descended from him’.<sup>820</sup>

Goldenberg proceeds:

‘Some have claimed that this tale reflects a racist view not only of the Black’s skin colour as a curse, but also of the Black as sexually promiscuous. Otherwise, why the connection between black skin and a sexual sin?.. However, the story, when viewed in historical and cultural context, presents a different picture... Why was it Ham whom the Rabbis depicted as having a change of colour? Because, according to biblical

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<sup>817</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 108b.

<sup>818</sup> Genesis Rabbah,I, ed.Romm (Vilna, 1909) 36:7, 149.

<sup>819</sup> Palestinian Talmud: Ta’anit 7a.

<sup>820</sup> Rashi to Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 108b.

genealogy, Ham was the ancestor of the dark-skinned Egyptians and Kushites. Furthermore, by this time it was believed – incorrectly – that the name derived from a Hebrew root meaning ‘dark’, ‘brown’, or ‘black’. Thus the Rabbis were able to account for the existence of dark-skinned people while at the same time implicitly explaining the etymology of the name Ham'.<sup>821</sup>

In my view, Goldenberg has erroneously chosen to highlight a Talmudic *aggadic* passage, which, at least for many of the foremost medieval authorities, such as Maimonides, Nahmanides, and indeed Abrabanel himself, is *not* of binding authority, as the source for the rabbinic stance towards Blacks, and notion of the origin of their skin-colour, rather than the explicit episode related in the Pentateuch itself of Ham revealing his father Noah's nakedness.<sup>822</sup> Clearly the Pentateuch *was* of binding authority upon the Talmudic sages and their medieval successors, who interpret and use it as proof. Revealingly, Abrabanel himself, in his elaborate discussions of the matter, mentions only the biblical episode, making no reference to the Talmudic legend.<sup>823</sup> Thus apparently Goldenberg's thesis (which indeed refers to Rashi alone) is heavily flawed, at least insofar as influences upon Abrabanel are concerned. For other medieval rabbis, the Talmudic legend may have served merely as ‘icing on the cake’, but no more.

Arguably, Goldenberg's thesis is refutable in yet another way. Rashi's comment on the relevant passage is terse. The only Talmudic commentator known to me who elaborates is the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> cent. R. Samuel Edels ('Maharsha'), who explains that as

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<sup>821</sup> See fn.819.

<sup>822</sup> Genesis 9:22.

<sup>823</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 168-169.

Cush was the eldest of Ham's sons, it was fitting that the punishment should fall upon him.<sup>824</sup>

However, in the parallel version of the legend in Genesis Rabbah 36:7 (which, incidentally, omits mention of the raven), the wording is significantly different:

'Said R. Hiyya bar Abba: "Ham and the dog had intercourse in the ark – therefore Ham emerged (with his skin) blackened (like charcoal)"...'

Rashi, commenting on this passage, observes: 'Ham fathered a son whose face would be black, as it is written: "And the children of Ham (were) Cush and Mizra'im" ...'<sup>825</sup>

He makes it clear that the penalty of black skin was not inflicted on Ham himself, but on his descendants. Significantly, however, Rashi here includes Mizra'im (ancestor of the Egyptians) together with Cush, as recipients of the penalty, whereas in his Talmudic commentary, he restricts it to Cush alone.<sup>826</sup> The Egyptians, though dark-skinned, are not black like the Ethiopians; hence Rashi appears to be diluting his message. Moreover, this internal contradiction within Rashi, in my view, somewhat weakens the authoritative force of the rabbinic dictum in any event.

Yet another consideration, overlooked in Goldenberg's analysis, is surely relevant here. The *midrashic* excerpt from Genesis Rabbah appears alongside an *alternative statement* within the same passage to the effect that Ham was actually punished because he castrated his father Noah, to prevent him having a fourth son to serve him

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<sup>824</sup>‘Maharsha’ to Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 108b, likewise commenting on the phrase ‘was punished in his skin’.

<sup>825</sup> Rashi to Genesis Rabbah 36:7, 149.

<sup>826</sup> See fn.820.

in his old age. (According to the rabbis advancing this idea, castration is what is meant by the euphemistic biblical phrase ‘revealing his father’s nakedness’.) Three separate rabbis indeed embrace this notion, each explaining the appropriateness of the punishment somewhat differently. Either:

- a. ‘You (Ham) prevented me (Noah) from having a fourth son to serve me; therefore that man (your son Canaan) will be a permanent slave to his brothers’; or
- b. ‘You prevented me from copulating (an act conducted in the dark) – therefore that man (your son Canaan) will be ugly and dark-skinned’; or
- c. ‘You prevented me from having a fourth son – therefore I curse your fourth son’ (Canaan).

Thus the statement embraced so enthusiastically by Goldenberg as the official rabbinic explanation for the Cushites’ blackness emerges as only one of several alternatives, the others all being related to Ham’s conduct as narrated in the Pentateuch. There is accordingly no warrant for singling out the ‘sex-in-the-ark’ motif (as Goldenberg dubs it) in preference to the others. Moreover, the mere fact that it also appears in the Talmud lends it no extra weight, for, as Samuel ha-Nagid,<sup>827</sup> Maimonides,<sup>828</sup> Nahmanides<sup>829</sup> and others emphasise, *aggadic dicta* possess no binding force in Judaism.

It is almost certainly due to such considerations that Abrabanel himself ignores the ‘sex-in-the-ark’ theme, preferring to focus upon the explicit biblical narrative. Of

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<sup>827</sup> Samuel ha-Nagid: Introduction to the Talmud: in Babylonian Talmud, ed. Pe’er ha-Torah: Tractate Berakhot (Jerusalem, 1967) 90.

<sup>828</sup> Maimonides: Guide, 376.

<sup>829</sup> Kitvei Ramban I: ‘Nahmanides’ Disputation, 308.

course, Goldenberg does deal comprehensively with this aspect of the matter in ‘The Curse of Ham’, and here one can be entirely *ad idem* with him.

### 3. Abrabanel’s Own Views

Having set the scene, we are now in a position to analyse Abrabanel’s own views on race and ethnicity as expressed in his biblical exegesis. The scope of the present study encompasses all Abrabanel’s biblical commentaries, both on the Pentateuch and the Prophets. He is one of the few classical Jewish exegetes to introduce ethnic themes into his interpretations of Scripture, and I contend that he does so primarily because:

- As evident from any cursory study of Abrabanel’s commentaries, he does not invariably confine himself strictly to the interpretation of the passage commented upon, but frequently digresses, utilising the particular passage in question as a springboard for imparting interesting incidental historical or topical information, and/or as a vehicle for airing his own views on such matters.
- As a prominent political figure and commercial agent with wide-ranging international connections, he was able carefully to observe the *mores* and general life-style of the people around him. He was no isolated academic, but, by virtue of his elevated social status and position, automatically mingled with Gentile society, especially its upper echelons. Whilst he was serving as Treasurer to the Portuguese crown, his countrymen had already commenced their exploration of Africa and Asia, chiefly to discover fresh trading routes to distant parts of the globe. The Portuguese were the first European nation to initiate the slave-trade from West Africa. Undertaking expeditions to the African coast, they forcibly took captive thousands of

black men and women, whom they transported to the shores of their native land to be sold as slaves in the markets, primarily to the aristocracy, or passed on to Mediterranean markets, or, later, to be dispatched to work in the newly-discovered colonies.<sup>830</sup> This lucrative slave trade, entailing great cruelty, became an entrenched feature of Portuguese society for several centuries. Whilst Catholic teaching initially condemned ‘unjust’ forms of slavery in general, once the Age of Discovery had greatly increased the number of slaves owned by Christians, the Church’s response, under strong political pressures, was confused and ineffective in preventing the establishment of slave societies in the colonies of Catholic countries. Papal bulls such as ‘*Dum Diversas*’, ‘*Romanus Pontifex*’, and their derivatives, sanctioned slavery and were used to justify enslavement of natives and the appropriation of their lands during this era.<sup>831</sup>

It will be recalled from my biographical chapter that Abrabanel’s wife herself owned a young female African slave, Biccinae, whom she subsequently transferred as a gift to the wife of the Judeo-Italian magnate and philanthropist Yehiel of Pisa.<sup>832</sup> This shows that Abrabanel did not disapprove of the practice of slavery *per se* (being, after all, explicitly sanctioned by the Pentateuch), and was prepared to accept it in practice as one of the integral features of the aristocratic environment in which he had been reared. Certainly, to the modern mind, the notion of being employed as a household slave seems repellent, but it must have been fairly common, as Biccinae was

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<sup>830</sup> Some black slaves arriving in Portugal were, however, not seized in raids but sold to the Portuguese, at El Mina and elsewhere, by their African owners.

<sup>831</sup> ‘*Dum Diversas*’ and ‘*Romanus Pontifex*’ were issued by Pope Nicholas V on 18 June 1452 and 5 January 1455 respectively.

<sup>832</sup> See Chapter 1.

registered notarially in a regular manner.<sup>833</sup> African slaves were employed in a variety of occupations, but were increasingly to be found in urban employment such as domestic service.<sup>834</sup> There is no extant record of how Abrabanel's wife treated her young slave-girl, but we know that, on despatching her to Yehiel's wife, she praises her highly, in an accompanying letter addressed to Yehiel composed by Abrabanel himself, for her good looks and domestic efficiency.<sup>835</sup> Moreover, Abrabanel makes it clear, in his commentary to Exodus 21:20, that the object of the Pentateuch's imposition of a capital sentence upon an Israelite beating his Gentile slave to death is to eradicate all traits of cruelty towards other human beings.<sup>836</sup>

### 3.1 Biblical Sources

Having surveyed the relevant historical background, we are now in a position to analyse the various instances, interspersed throughout Scripture, where Abrabanel introduces the race and ethnicity theme into his exegesis. I have accordingly extracted the following relevant passages, which will be cited and scrutinised in turn, in light of the views of the contemporary scholar Jonathan Schorsch, who has already dealt specifically with this subject.<sup>837</sup> Abrabanel's relevant observations on these biblical passages will also be compared with those of other traditional Jewish commentators, to ascertain whether, and if so, to what extent, his interpretations differ fundamentally from theirs. It will, however, be most convenient to discuss Schorsch's ideas separately, on conclusion of my own analysis of the relevant biblical passages.

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<sup>833</sup> Ibid.

<sup>834</sup> Old.antislavery.org/slave routes/slave routes Portugal.shtml.

<sup>835</sup> Letters of Jews through the Ages I, ed.F.Kobler (London, 1953) 324.

<sup>836</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Exodus, 205.

<sup>837</sup> J. Schorsch: Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World (Cambridge, 2004).

### 3.1.1 Genesis 10:1

‘And these are the generations of the children of Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth...’

Abrabanel remarks:

(24) ‘... *He is called “Ham”, either because his heart is fired up to pursue his lustful desires, or because he is black and ugly, his skin (being) like that of an Ethiopian, and (ugly likewise) in his appearance and character traits.. For (the name) ‘Ham’ is verbally connected with the phrase (Gen.30:32): ‘ve’khol seh hum ba’kesavim’* (‘all that were black amongst the sheep’). *He is the opposite to Japheth, who is handsome in his (physical) form and (pleasant) in his ways... and you can see how the characteristics of these three ancestors (of humanity) are... found amongst the peoples descending from them... for from Ham came Cush, Mizra’im, Put and Canaan, all of whom are... ugly in appearance... their features... black as a raven’s, steeped in immorality and attracted to animal-like lusts – deficient in intelligence and knowledge, and lacking in civilisation, in worthy character-trait and (physical) strength. But (by contrast) the children of Japheth from whom the Greeks and the Romans are derived – how superb are their peoples’ deeds,... customs, civilised practices, modes of conduct, and (physical) prowess – and they are all well-built in form and (handsome) in appearance – whiter than milk, ruddier than rubies.*’<sup>838</sup>

(It is interesting to compare the negative physical descriptions and the general portrayal of Black Africans to be found on Abrabanel’s biblical commentaries with

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<sup>838</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 171.

near-contemporary Portuguese writings. The Chronicles of Azurara,<sup>839</sup> speaking of the discovery of Guinea by Prince Henry the Navigator - in contrast to Abrabanel - have surprisingly little to say about their physical characteristics, other than that they were strong,<sup>840</sup> and that their women hid their faces with woollen capes, albeit their bodies were naked.<sup>841</sup> However, Zurara (Azurara) consistently portrays the African Blacks as being of a highly aggressive nature, assailing the Portuguese newcomers with bows and poisoned arrows, poisoned javelins, lances and bucklers, thus preventing them from disembarking.<sup>842</sup> This negative description of their character contrasts remarkably with Abrabanel's depiction of their character in his commentary to Amos 9 (see below), though it is only fair to say that Zurara was viewing them from the perspective of defending their territory, whilst Abrabanel was viewing them from the vastly different one of captive slaves.)

From the above-cited passage from Abrabanel it is evident how entrenched his ideas are concerning the merits and demerits of different racial groups. He manifestly regards black races as inferior to white, both in physical appearance and moral character. He indeed associates the very name 'Ham' with the colour black, and the name 'Japheth' with physical beauty [deriving 'Yefet' from the word 'yafeh' (beautiful)]. However, it should be appreciated that Abrabanel traces this fundamental dichotomy between the descendants of Ham and of Japheth to the *deeds* of their respective ancestors. He suggests that Ham's moral deficiencies were transmitted to

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<sup>839</sup> G.E. de Zurara: *Chronicles of Azurara: Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*: Eng. trans. B. Miall (London, 1936).

<sup>840</sup> Ibid. 216-217.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid.223.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid. 195-196, 237-238, 242, 251 *et al.*

his descendants, and likewise, conversely, in the case of Japheth, who saved his father's honour.

Abrabanel here provides a clear exposition of the theories of ethnicity common amongst his European contemporaries (and in later generations). In this regard, he was a product of his age. Schorsch provides several most illuminating views of black Africans culled from both Gentile and Jewish 16<sup>th</sup> century sources. He cites Robert Gainsh's narrative of the second English voyage to sub-Saharan Africa in 1554, describing how the 'women are common: for they contracte no matrimonie, neyther have respecte to chastitie'.<sup>843</sup> Similarly, he cites the Dutch traveller Hugh van Linschoten depicting Central African women as 'much given to lust and uncleanness, specially with strangers, which among them is no shame'.<sup>844</sup> He further notes that the 16th century astronomer Tycho Brahe attributed the Ethiopians' blackness to the biblical punishment inflicted upon Ham.<sup>845</sup> On the Jewish side, he cites Maharal's 'Derekh Hayyim' as stating, in his commentary to Tractate Avot 2:7:

'As maidservants are daughters of Ham and are steeped in licentiousness, because they follow their origin, it is found that an increase in their number is an increase in licentiousness...'<sup>846</sup>

Two particular points, however, emerge from the above excerpt from Abrabanel. The first is his manifest admiration for the Greeks and Romans, as the cream of Japheth,

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<sup>843</sup> Schorsch: Jews and Blacks, 395,fn.17, citing Richard Eden and Richard Willes, eds. 'The History of Travayle in the West and East Indies, and Other Countreys Lying either Way' (London, 1577) 349r.

<sup>844</sup> Ibid.,citing English trans. John Huighen van Linschoten, His Discourse of voyages into Ye Easte and West Indies (London: John Wolfe, n.d. 1598) 200.

<sup>845</sup> Ibid.411, fn.98, citing Borst, Turnbau von Babel, IV, 1211.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid.414, fn.141, citing Maharal: Derekh Hayyim (Israel, 1980) 83.

and their descendants, whom he evidently identifies with his contemporary Europeans. The contrast here between his respective descriptions of the black and white races is very marked. Moreover, his perspective is ostensibly objective, since, as a Jew, and thus a descendant neither of Ham nor of Japheth, but of Shem, he fell outside both categories, and accordingly had no inherent bias towards either.

Secondly, as aforementioned, Abrabanel attributes the superiority of the Japhethitic over the Hamitic races to the *conduct* of their respective ancestors. He takes his cue from the scriptural narrative recording Ham's disgraceful humiliation of his father Noah, who, reacting to this, cursed Ham's youngest son Canaan, condemning him (and his descendants) to be 'a slave of slaves to his brothers' (Gen:9:25), apparently forever. In similar fashion, he notes the blessing bestowed by Noah upon Japheth, who restored his human dignity: 'May God enlarge Japheth' (Gen: 9:27). Abrabanel evidently feels that both the blessing and the curse must be fulfilled for Divine justice to be vindicated. While undeniably racist overtones are involved here, the underlying message of Scripture is, for Abrabanel, a *religious* one – morally worthy conduct merits and duly receives its reward, and vice versa. This notion is far removed from the crude racism associated with 19th and early 20th century Germanic theories of inherent Aryan racial superiority.

### 3.1.2 Genesis 12:11

The previous verse (10) relates that Abram and his wife travelled from Canaan to Egypt to escape the ravages of famine. Verse 11 states:

‘And it was, when he (Abram) drew near to come into Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife: ‘Behold, now I know that you are a woman of beautiful appearance’.

The obvious question, raised by several commentators besides Abrabanel, is what did Abram mean by the word ‘*now*’? He had, after all, already been married to her for many years, and surely would have known of her beauty long ago!

Before turning to Abrabanel’s own commentary on this passage, it will be instructive to examine how it is tackled by Rashi:

‘Behold, now I know’: The *midrashic* explanation is: Until now he had not perceived her beauty owing to the extreme modesty of both of them; now, however, through this event, he became cognisant of it (Tanhuma). Another explanation: Usually, due to the exertion of travelling, a person becomes uncomely, but she had retained her beauty (Gen.R. 40). Still, the real sense (P’shat’) of the text is this: Behold, now the time has come when I am anxious because of thy beauty. I have long known that thou art fair of appearance; but now we are travelling among black and repulsive people, brethren of the Ethiopians (Cushim), who have never been accustomed to see a beautiful woman...’,<sup>847</sup>

It is arguable that, whilst the *midrashic* interpretation is not racist, the ‘P’shat’ offered by Rashi is.

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<sup>847</sup> A.M. Silbermann’s annotated English translation of Rashi’s pentateuchal commentary (Jerusalem, 1985) has been used throughout this dissertation.

Let us now compare this with the comment of Ibn Ezra, a supreme exponent of ‘*P’shat*’:

‘... The meaning of (the phrase) “Behold, now I know”, is that there (were women of) comparable beauty to Sarai in his native land, but in Egypt and... the Negev (south Canaan) there were none like her, for (people’s) appearances (can) change owing to the (surrounding) atmosphere’ (i.e. climatic environment).<sup>848</sup>

Ibn Ezra, whilst acknowledging that the inhabitants of southern, semi-tropical regions are less good-looking than their northerly counterparts, attributes the difference exclusively to climatic factors. His interpretation is thus arguably not genuinely racist.

Nahmanides, challenging Rashi’s ‘*P’shat*’ interpretation, concludes that the Hebrew word ‘*na*’ employed in the text does not necessarily mean only ‘*now*’, as opposed to previously, but can denote both the past and the present in conjunction.<sup>849</sup> Thus, Abram is merely declaring that, whilst he has always recognised his wife’s great beauty, a potential danger is now likely to arise from this due to their imminent arrival in Egypt.

Abrabanel enquires:

(25) ‘What is the meaning of ‘behold, now I know’, for which none of the commentators has given a satisfactory explanation?’

He explains:

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<sup>848</sup> Ibn Ezra to Genesis 12:11, ed. Mikra’ot Gedolot I (Jerusalem, 1997) 224.

<sup>849</sup> Nahmanides to Genesis 12:11: ibid. 225.

*'... The underlying significance of all this is that Abram did not know... Egypt, having never previously gone down there – and...when he had been with his wife in... Canaan, he entertained no doubt (as to any potential risk to her), because his wife was, in... her beauty and appearance, (exactly) like the other women of the country...hence he had no fear that they (the native men) would take her (captive). But when he was compelled to go to Egypt, he expected that the men and women there were (just) like they were in... Canaan... had he known the truth about the Egyptians, he would not have gone down there... Regarding this (situation), it is stated: ... 'when he drew near to enter Egypt"; for it was then that he began to entertain doubt (as to Sarai's safety), on seeing that the Egyptian men and women were ugly, as black as a raven; ... it was then that he said to Sarah...: "Behold, now I know that you are a beautiful woman'... 'when we were on the other side of the River (Euphrates), and also in... Canaan, where all the women were of goodly appearance, I did not appreciate that you were... of particularly beautiful appearance, as all the other women were equally so, and you possessed no distinctive superiority...; but now that we are in... Egypt, where all the men and women are black and ugly like Ethiopians<sup>850</sup>... now I know... that you are... beautiful... in comparison with the Egyptian women" – for a thing stands out more starkly when contrasted with its opposite.'*

Significantly, though, he adds:

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<sup>850</sup> Abrabanel conveniently employs the term *cushi'* (strictly used in the Bible to denote the Ethiopians, or also, probably, the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula) as a generic term for all black races. Notably, *passim*, Goldenberg, in 'The Curse of Ham' appears ambiguous and self- contradictory as to the precise connotation of 'Cush'. Whilst at pp.46/47, he expressly equates Cush with Ethiopia, at p52 he maintains that it was the ancient name of the area in N.W. Arabia, later known as Midian, and that the interpretation of 'Cushite' in Numbers 12:1 as 'Ethiopian' represents a minority view amongst contemporary biblical scholars.

*'It is for the following reason that Scripture states: "for you are a woman of beautiful appearance", and not 'of shapely form'; because the beauty lay in her white complexion; but the Egyptians, though black-skinned, were not thereby precluded from being of shapely form, which is associated with their bone structure.'*<sup>851</sup>

Although Rashi's '*P'shat*' resembles Abrabanel's, undoubtedly Abrabanel's tone is more emphatic. Accordingly, I have cited his comments in full, despite their repetitious nature, to illustrate the contrast most forcefully. Plainly, Abrabanel himself believes that a white skin is more attractive than a black, and reads this notion into the biblical text. However, he significantly qualifies this ostensibly racist view by his subsequent remark that black-skinned individuals can still possess shapely figures, thereby rendering his overall perspective more nuanced.

### 3.1.3 Numbers 12:1

The next passage relevant to this theme is Abrabanel's commentary to Numbers 12:1.

The relevant verse states:

'And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses on account of the Cushite woman he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman.'

Most traditional Jewish exegetes, including Abrabanel, following the Midrash, identify this Cushite woman with Zipporah, named as Moses' wife in Exodus 2:21. He also adopts the traditional view (not derived from a literal reading of the biblical

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<sup>851</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 194.

text) that Moses' siblings' complaint against him was not that he had married Zipporah, but that he had now seen fit to separate sexually from her, fully aware of her resultant emotional distress. What is interesting, however, is Abrabanel's detailed analysis of their supposed words.

(26) *'...For they said that Moses' separation from his wife could be for only one of three reasons, or a combination of them all, viz.*

*a. that she was as black-(skinned) as a raven – for Zipporah was from Midian and was black, since Midianites were Ishmaelites, (their skin) blackened by the power of the sun and its heat; and perhaps Moses withdrew from her because she did not (physically) please him...*

[Abrabanel's other two reasons are not germane to the argument.]

He continues:

*... 'And they said that, if he had done so (i.e. separated from her) because Zipporah was black, like an Ethiopian, behold, when he (first) married her, she was already black! Can an Ethiopian change his skin? But notwithstanding this, he married her and had children by her. and, if so, what (new factor) had now become apparent to him that he separated from her?... it would have been better for him not to have married her on account of her being a Cushite than to have separated from her many years after his marriage...*

... *'It is (now) explained (by Scripture) what the essence of this speech (Miriam's complaint) was... Moses had separated himself sexually from his wife, as Zipporah, hailing from Midian... in... Ethiopia, was black'* (which Moses plainly knew initially).<sup>852</sup>

One may infer from these observations that Abrabanel accepts that black women are less attractive than white. According to him, although Miriam acknowledges this, she still sympathises with Zipporah's current plight in finding herself suddenly abandoned by her husband, and is, in a sense, supportive of her. Naturally, Abrabanel presents the argument as Miriam's, but one may reasonably assume that he is, perhaps subconsciously, placing his own thoughts in her mouth. I maintain that Abrabanel (consistently with his remarks elsewhere) does regard blacks as of inferior beauty to whites, but nonetheless does not feel that they should be penalised for this.

### 3.1.3.1 Comparison with Other Commentators

It is important to examine Abrabanel's interpretation of this passage in light of the explanations offered by his exegetic predecessors. Targum Onkelos (which generally renders the biblical text literally) here deviates from the norm and translates the Hebrew word '*cushit*' by the Aramaic '*shapirta*' (beautiful).<sup>853</sup>

Ibn Ezra, however, suggests that Onkelos deliberately employs this expression '*derekh kavod*' – out of respect for Zipporah, and to preserve her dignity, but he

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<sup>852</sup> Idem: Commentary to Numbers, 55-56.

<sup>853</sup> Onkelos to Numbers 12:1, ed. Mikra'ot Gedolot (Jerusalem, 1997/98) 200.

personally deems such usage illegitimate, as one cannot employ the same expression simultaneously for praise and denigration.<sup>854</sup>

Most illuminating, however, is Rashi's extensive series of comments on this verse. He writes:

'The Cushite Woman' – 'This tells us that all agreed as to her beauty, just as all agree as to the blackness of an Ethiopian' (cf. Sifre).

'Cushit' – 'The numerical value (*Gematria*) (of this word) is the same (736) as that of "yefat mar'eh" – 'a woman of beautiful appearance.'

'Because of the (Cushite) woman' – 'Because of her having been divorced by Moses.'

'For he had married a Cushite woman' – 'What is the force of this statement? (It appears superfluous, since the phrase 'on account of the Cushite woman' has already been explained to refer to Moses having divorced his Cushite wife, so it is unnecessary to state later that he had married her!) But it is... to suggest the following: You may find a woman who is pleasant on account of her beauty but not pleasant by reason of her deeds; or one pleasant because of her conduct but not because of her beauty. This (woman) however, was pleasant in every respect.'

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<sup>854</sup> Ibn Ezra to Numbers 12:1.

‘The Cushite woman’ – Because of her beauty, she was called ‘the Ethiopian’, just as a man calls his handsome son ‘Moor’, in order that the evil eye should have no power over him.’

‘For he had married a Cushite (a beautiful) woman’, and had now divorced her.<sup>855</sup> Rashi clearly wishes to stress that Zipporah was beautiful, but that, notwithstanding this, Moses had divorced her – this was Miriam’s complaint. In accordance with the ‘*Gemetric*’ mode of interpretation (attributing significance to two different Hebrew words or phrases having the identical numerical value) the very word ‘*cushit*’ itself has the same numerical value as the Hebrew words for ‘*beautiful of appearance*’; and, according to an alternative explanation, the expression ‘*cushit*’ is the deliberate use of an opposite description, to ward off the ‘evil eye’ which might be aroused by praising the woman in a truthful manner, as her looks merit.

Although arguably Rashi (and/or his *midrashic* sources) do implicitly here acknowledge, by this latter comment, that the term ‘*cushit*’, in its plain, literal sense, is indeed pejorative, and hence there is a racist element in their thinking, I consider nonetheless that, taken overall, the thrust of Rashi’s words is not racist.

### 3.1.3.2 Abrabanel’s Response

As has been seen, Abrabanel does not follow Rashi’s *midrashic* route, but likewise steers clear of the diametrically opposite approach adopted by several of his illustrious predecessors, such as the 13th/14th century philosopher and biblical exegete Joseph Ibn Kaspi. To my knowledge, Ibn Kaspi is the only major traditional commentator

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<sup>855</sup> Silbermann: Chumash with Rashi’s Commentary: Numbers, 59. Rashi’s comments are drawn from Sifre to Numbers 12: cf. Malbim: Commentary to Numbers (Jerusalem, 1956) 180.

[besides the early medieval literalist French exegetes Joseph Bekhor Shor,<sup>856</sup> Rashbam,<sup>857</sup> and Hizkiah b. Manoah ('Hizkuni')] to interpret the relevant verse entirely literally. Ibn Kaspi explains that Miriam and Aaron were angry that Moses had, just recently, taken a Cushite woman as a second wife (besides Zipporah), which scarcely befitted his elevated rank and status. He interprets the word '*cushit*' literally, and gives it an unambiguously pejorative connotation, adding that Miriam's and Aaron's sin was their failure to judge their brother's motives favourably.<sup>858</sup>

Abrabanel, who does not mention Ibn Kaspi's view here, but must have been aware of it as he cites his commentary elsewhere, apparently considers this interpretation unacceptable, partly, I believe, because he considers Ibn Kaspi has deviated too far from sacred tradition, and partly because he generally opposes Ibn Kaspi's superrational mode of biblical exegesis, indeed deeming him a dangerous heretic.<sup>859</sup> (It is doubtful whether Abrabanel had read the commentaries of Bekhor Shor, Rashbam or Hizkuni, as he never alludes to them.)

In any event, Abrabanel evidently chooses to steer a careful middle course between what he regards as the overly fanciful *midrashic* exegesis of this passage on the one hand, and the strictly literal on the other. His stance, reflecting his mindset, is thus not overtly racist, but finely balanced and nuanced.

### 3.1.4 II Samuel 18

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<sup>856</sup> Bekhor Shor: Commentary to the Pentateuch (Jerusalem, 1994) 258.

<sup>857</sup> Rashbam to Numbers 12:1: ed. Mikra'ot Gedolot (Jerusalem, 1997/98) 201.

<sup>858</sup> Ibn Kaspi: *Mishneh Kesef*, ed. I.H. Last (Cracow, 1906) – Commentary to Numbers 12:1, 254-256.

<sup>859</sup> E. Kupfer: 'Kaspi, Joseph ben Abba Mari, Ibn (En Bonafoix del'Argentiere)' in: *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10, ed. C.Roth & G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1972) 810.

A further intriguing biblical passage involving a Cushite occurs in II Samuel 18, which relates that King David's forces had finally defeated those of his rebellious son Absalom, and David's general Joab, though keen to report the victory to David, was worried at having simultaneously to report Absalom's death. The text states that Joab selected a Cushite as a messenger for this purpose, to run from the battlefield and inform David, instead of Ahimaaz, son of Zadok the priest.

Abrabanel, on II Samuel 18:19, remarks:

*'...And it (the text) says 'a Cushite', meaning a particular individual of Cushite descent who had converted (to the Israelite faith), or a Jew whose name was 'Cushi' , on account of his black skin.'*<sup>860</sup>

He then cites Midrash 'Pirke de R. Eliezer' (Ch.53)

*'...R. Eliezer says: 'Come and see how great was the perfection and uprightness of this man, in that he said to Joab: "if you gave me 1000 pieces of silver, I would not transgress the command of the king that he commanded you", as it is stated':<sup>861</sup> (a supporting quotation from II Samuel 18:12 follows).*

This Midrash is interesting because it identifies the Cushite mentioned in II Samuel 18:19 with 'a certain man' who initially reported to Joab that he had seen Absalom hanging from the branches of a tree by his hair, and then, on being challenged by Joab as to why he had not peremptorily killed him, explained that to have done so would be

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<sup>860</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 372.

<sup>861</sup> Pirke de R. Eliezer ch.53 (Jerusalem, 2005).

against the king's express command, and thus repugnant to him. This identification, evidently endorsed by Abrabanel (as he cites the Midrash without comment) is, however, not obvious from a plain reading of the narrative.

Thus, effectively, Abrabanel seems to be anxious to stress, through the medium of the Midrash, the *moral perfection* of this Cushite who was, according to him, either an ethnic Ethiopian who had converted to the Israelite faith, or an exceptionally dark-skinned Israelite. The colour of the man's skin was accordingly no bar to his moral perfection.

### 3.1.5 Amos 9:7

The next biblical passage meriting consideration, insofar as Abrabanel's exegesis is concerned, is Amos 9:7, a somewhat enigmatic verse, which reads:

(27) '*Are you not as the Children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O Children of Israel? says the Lord'...*

Abrabanel comments:<sup>862</sup>

... '*The meaning of 'Are you not like the Children of the Ethiopians' etc., is that the Lord is saying to His people: 'Are you not like the Children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel?' – for the descendants of Cush, the son of Ham, are perpetually enslaved to their masters. So, too, are you My slaves...by virtue of My having brought you up from... Egypt and acquired you with a strong hand...'*

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<sup>862</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Latter Prophets: Commentary to Amos (Tel Aviv, 1960) 106, 108-109.

A little later, he revealingly resumes:

*'...But... the (exegetical) modes of the (various) commentators on the interpretation of this prophecy are very different from my exposition; for... Rashi interpreted (the verse): "Are you not like the Children of the Ethiopians unto Me?" - 'why should I refrain from breaking (My covenant) with you (merely) because you do not return to Me? Are you not descended from the Children of Noah, like the Ethiopians to whom you are comparable, as is stated (elsewhere): 'Can an Ethiopian change his skin?'<sup>863</sup> 'But' (he continues), 'I find no valid (Divine) complaint (contained) in the biblical text if understood in accordance with his (Rashi's) interpretation. Is it merely because all of them (the Gentile nations) were the descendants of Noah or (even) of Abraham, who is of closer relationship to us, that they should be (automatically) regarded as equal before the Almighty? "Was not Esau a brother to Jacob?" says the Lord, "and (yet) I loved Jacob!"'*<sup>864</sup>

Abrabanel here disputes Rashi's interpretation of Amos's declaration as to the fundamental equality of all nations before God, on the grounds that it would be entirely acceptable for Him deliberately to favour one nation, such as Israel, over others, despite the common descent of all humanity from Noah's three sons. In support of his argument, he invokes Malachi 1:2, about Jacob and Esau, a verse directly in point. But although Abrabanel is prepared, in principle, to accept the possibility of inequalities amongst nations, his intellectual honesty prevents him

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<sup>863</sup> Jeremiah 13:23.

<sup>864</sup> A direct citation from Malachi 1:2.

swallowing the myth peddled by others that the black peoples, and in particular their womenfolk, are *promiscuous*, as will presently be seen. He continues:

(28) *'And, moreover, (if that were the real intention of this passage), would it not have been better to have compared them (the Israelites) to Ham, whom his father (actually) cursed, than to the Ethiopians?*

'Now' (he proceeds) '*... Ibn Ezra has written, in the name of Japheth<sup>865</sup>, that the wives of the Ethiopians are of loose morals, and none of them knows who his father is – whereas you (Israelites) are (all) children of one Father, 'for (it was) I (God) (who) brought you up from the land of Egypt, and, if so, I am your Father'... but I (Abrabanel) know not who informed Japheth of the lifestyle that he mentions (of the loose morals of the Cushite<sup>866</sup> wives); for I too have seen large numbers of them in my native land, and their wives were closely bonded to them, save (when they were forcibly separated from them) due to the captivity their enemies had imposed upon them...and accordingly they are, in this respect, (just) like the other nations...*'<sup>867</sup>

From this passage, where Abrabanel, in a personal vignette, reminisces about his encounter with Blacks, it is clear that he harbours no intrinsic prejudice against them. He challenges Ibn Ezra's (and his source, Japheth's) demeaning description of black women on the basis of the empirical evidence of his own eyes. This extract is interesting, first, because it is a typical instance of Abrabanel indulging in personal

<sup>865</sup> 'Japheth'- the renowned 10<sup>th</sup> century Karaite biblical commentator Japheth b.Ali, cited frequently by Ibn Ezra, and occasionally by Abrabanel himself.

<sup>866</sup> The slaves whom Abrabanel saw at Lisbon's harbour were West Africans, not Ethiopians, as he would have known. However, he invariably employs '*cushi*' as a generic term for all Blacks.

<sup>867</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Amos, 108-109.

reminiscences. He must frequently have walked along Lisbon's quayside, witnessing African slaves being hauled up from the galleys by the Portuguese sailors and merchantmen who intended to sell them at profitable prices to the aristocracy as domestic servants. Secondly, he seems determined to defend the moral reputation of female Blacks against Ibn Ezra's and Japheth's unwarranted slur against them. Abrabanel's observation, scarcely necessary for explication of the biblical text, must therefore be regarded as a genuine reflection of his personal opinion. Although his comments on other biblical passages mentioning Cushites examined above suggest that Abrabanel did consider a black *skin* less attractive physically than a white, he refused to extend the scope of such inferiority either to the *figures* or *bone-structure* of blacks, or to their moral conduct.

### 3.1.6 Jeremiah 38

A similar instance may be found in regard to Abrabanel's exposition of Jeremiah 38, which relates that the prophet had been thrown by the Judean princes into a clay pit, where he would eventually have sunk into the mire but for the timely intervention of a certain Eved-Melekh, a Cushite eunuch, who had pity on him. Abrabanel comments as follows on the relevant passage:

*'... This man's actual name was Eved-Melekh, not because he was a servant of the king,<sup>868</sup> but it merely (happened to be) his name;...he was a Cushite insofar as his skin-colour was concerned, and a eunuch. Targum Jonathan rendered the word 'sarîs' (normally translated 'eunuch') as 'a great man', meaning that he was (one) of the princes, for princes are called 'sarîsim'. But some of our Sages... have identified*

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<sup>868</sup> The literal translation of the Hebrew 'Eved-Melekh' is 'a king's servant'.

*the Cushite with (King) Zedekiah, and others with Barukh, son of Neriah – however, a verse cannot be deprived of its literal meaning. In any event, whoever he was, he spoke to the king (on Jeremiah’s behalf, to save his life)’.<sup>869</sup>*

Here again we see Abrabanel rejecting the various alternative identifications of Jeremiah’s saviour posited by the Midrash in favour of the simple contextual meaning of the verse – that a humble Cushite, Eved-Melekh, rather than an Israelite, was responsible for saving the prophet’s life. The message conveyed by Abrabanel again appears to be that a man’s skin-colour has no bearing upon his moral character.

#### 4. Analysis of Schorsch’s Views

As indicated above, Abrabanel’s stance on race and ethnicity must now be examined in light of the views of one of the recent scholars specialising in this topic, Jonathan Schorsch. In his work ‘Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World’, he devotes one chapter to Abrabanel, in which he not only analyses Abrabanel’s comments and observations on several (though not all) of the relevant biblical passages cited above, but depicts in detail the general historical context within which Abrabanel was writing, referring to numerous medieval literary sources, Jewish and Gentile. Such background is naturally significant in helping us obtain an accurate understanding of Abrabanel’s own position on these issues, especially as he had deeply immersed himself in classical and medieval European history, philosophy and literature. However, it must be stressed that Schorsch fails to adduce any *direct evidence from Abrabanel’s own words* that he had adopted, or been influenced by, the views of others in this regard. The only sources he cites in support of his position are the

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<sup>869</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Jeremiah, 402-403.

traditional rabbinic ones, the Midrashim. Accordingly, the question of the extent of medieval Jewish and/or Gentile literary influences upon his thinking must ultimately remain open.

I have already highlighted the fact that Abrabanel appears to have a more negative attitude towards Blacks in some passages of his writings than in others. In this connection, Schorsch observes:

‘I read Abrabanel’s conflicted statements about blacks as a reflection of the attitudes of a certain class towards the historical juncture of the beginnings of the systematic enslavement of Black Africans by the Iberian powers composed through the lens of previous Jewish notions regarding Cushites’.<sup>870</sup>

In context, Schorsch’s reference to ‘the attitudes of a certain class’ is to the ambiguous stance towards Blacks and the newly burgeoning black slave-trade adopted by the upper echelons of Iberian society - the nobility and higher clergy. He intimates that Abrabanel, who mingled in aristocratic circles, would inevitably have imbibed some of their ideology and attitudes. With few exceptions, these were of a negative nature towards Blacks, viewing them as of an inferior culture; such attitudes would have served as a convenient moral justification for their forcible seizure as slaves.

Schorsch indeed cites several medieval Christian and Muslim sources reflecting such notions. Amongst the Christian sources is Alfonso Tostado, the early 15th century

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<sup>870</sup> Schorsch: Jews and Blacks, 18.

Catholic ecclesiastic who composed voluminous biblical commentaries, and who is regarded by Gaon and others as having been a major literary and theological influence on Abrabanel himself.<sup>871</sup> Tostado writes that melancholics (i.e. dark-coloured people) ‘required the taking in of more delight than other people, due to their impetuous and changeable nature’.<sup>872</sup> Schorsch further mentions that in standard Muslim discourse, the description ‘Banu Ham’ ('the sons of Ham') is a synonym for the Sudanese (East African Blacks).<sup>873</sup> These sources do not, however, constitute particularly strong proof for Schorsch’s thesis. Regarding Tostado, Schorsch himself concedes that ‘melancholics’ are not necessarily identifiable with the black races; and the Muslim epithet for the Sudanese is not necessarily pejorative. Again, Schorsch asserts that Abrabanel also drew upon several prior Jewish and Christian sources for the ideas of ‘humoral blackness’ embraced in his writings, but adduces no direct proof for such an assertion.

To what extent were Abrabanel’s views on issues of race and ethnicity influenced by earlier Jewish commentators? Here Schorsch presents an impressive array of potential sources upon whom Abrabanel might have drawn. He initially cites three earlier exegetes, Bekhor Shor, Da’at Zekenim mi-Ba’alei ha-Tosafot and Ibn Kaspi, all of whom held that Noah’s curse fell not only upon Canaan, but upon all Ham’s children (which would include the Cushites).<sup>874</sup> However, as the first two of these are never cited anywhere by Abrabanel, it is unlikely that he was influenced by them, and moreover, as aforementioned, he generally dislikes Ibn Kaspi’s views!

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<sup>871</sup> See Introduction (Literature Review); Gaon: Dissertation (Univ. of London, 1939) pub. in: Library of Sephardi History and Thought, II (Hoboken, 1993).

<sup>872</sup> Schorsch: Jews and Blacks, 27.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid.

<sup>874</sup> Ibid.

Schorsch also usefully highlights Radak's comment on Amos 9:7 (one of the verses selected above for scrutiny in relation to Abrabanel), who interprets the prophecy to mean that the Israelites are in a state of perpetual servitude to God, 'like the Cushites, who are slaves; and these are the blacks descending from Cush, son of Ham, who are sold to be slaves'.<sup>875</sup> He adds, however, that Abrabanel himself goes further than Radak, by asserting that '*they (the Cushites) will not be free in any respect*' – from which it is clear that Abrabanel assumed Cushite servitude to be perpetual in nature.<sup>876</sup>

Two additional, lesser-known traditional Jewish sources are also mentioned by Schorsch. One is the philosopher Shem Tov b. Joseph Falaquera (13<sup>th</sup> cent., N. Spain) who, in describing a traumatic dream, utilised as tormentors two ugly Cushites who sought to stab the dreamer with their spears as he trudged through a desert.<sup>877</sup> The other is R. Samuel Zarza's citation of his contemporary R. Solomon al-Konstantini (14<sup>th</sup> cent.) who, in his commentary to Genesis 10:8 ('and Cush begat Nimrod'), referred to 'Cushite moisture' which, on increasing in the body, generates evil thoughts.<sup>878</sup> But again, Schorsch furnishes no proof that Abrabanel was influenced by these sources.

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<sup>875</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>876</sup> Ibid, citing Abrabanel's commentary to Amos 9:7.

<sup>877</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>878</sup> Ibid.

Finally, Schorsch observes that the Karaite exegete Japheth was not alone in accusing Blacks of promiscuity.<sup>879</sup> This opinion, apparently endorsed by Ibn Ezra, was also shared by the rabbinic author Tanhum b. Joseph ha-Yerushalmi (13th century, Egypt).

It seems fair to conclude from the above that Abrabanel, perhaps subconsciously, adopted the rather negative views about Blacks interspersed throughout his exegetical works from his traditional Jewish medieval predecessors, and, in somewhat lesser measure, from Christian authorities.<sup>880</sup> Yet Schorsch himself strangely shies away from this logical inference, being ostensibly reluctant to trace the origin of anti-black sentiment ultimately to Jews and Judaism. He indeed criticises 20th century black and Christian scholars who have claimed that it was Jews who invented anti-black prejudices through the story of the curse of Ham.<sup>881</sup> His justification for this conclusion, notwithstanding the evidence he has adduced to the contrary, would be that, on the one hand, there *are* Gentile writers who also embrace such notions, whilst on the other, quite a number of more positive perspectives on blacks may be found within Jewish sources, including Abrabanel himself. It is doubtless significant in this connection that Schorsch entitles his relevant chapter on this topic ‘Abravanel’s Ambivalent Africans’. Moreover, as he observes:

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<sup>879</sup> Ibid.37.

<sup>880</sup> Schorsch maintains, in *ibid.* 33-34, that Christian writers were milder than Jewish ones in excoriating Ham’s descendants. For example, Aquinas, in his ‘Summa Theologica’, nowhere mentions ‘blackness’ or ‘Africa’ as such, and the Spanish jurist Palacios Rubios (Abrabanel’s contemporary) cites Noah’s curse on Ham as but one of many explanations for the rise of slavery.

<sup>881</sup> E.g. David Brion Davis, who claims, in his seminal work ‘Inhuman Bondage. The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World’ (N.Y. & Oxford, 2006) 55, that Abrabanel played a pivotal role in providing the conceptual basis for black slavery. This extreme view is repudiated by both Schorsch and Goldenberg, and notably, Davis himself adds, in qualification (p67): ‘It is most unfortunate that blame for a racist ‘Curse’ – that is, singling out blacks as the only people the Bible condemns with slavery – has been linked in modern times with a series of anti-Semitic mythologies that have also wrongly pictured Jews as the main traders in slaves across medieval Europe and subsequently as the dominant force behind the transatlantic African slave trade to the New World’.

‘Abravanel’s conflicting passages regarding blacks were written at different times and addressed different realms of discourse, the one abstract myth, the other actual living blacks’.<sup>882</sup>

Be that as it may, as this dissertation is confined solely to Abrabanel’s exegesis, it is strictly necessary to focus exclusively upon him. Besides the above observations and arguments, the following specific considerations mentioned by Schorsch (albeit not all pointing in the same direction), appear to me particularly germane in assessing Abrabanel’s overall stance towards racial and ethnic issues.

- Schorsch claims that Abrabanel mentions, in the Introduction of his Commentary to Joshua, that, whilst in Portugal, he had owned slaves.<sup>883</sup>
- There is, however, no evidence directly linking Abrabanel with slave trading.<sup>884</sup>
- Nowhere throughout his writings does he criticise Portuguese or other nations’ slaving practices and policies.<sup>885</sup>
- In his commentary to Isaiah 20:4, Abrabanel stresses that the *Egyptians* (who were not black) were more licentious than the Cushites.<sup>886</sup>
- Several rabbis sharing Abrabanel’s Iberian background contain *less* denigrating portraits of Ham, and no debasement of Cushites.

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<sup>882</sup> Schorsch: Jews and Blacks, 37.

<sup>883</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid.46.

<sup>885</sup> Ibid.47.

<sup>886</sup> Ibid.37.

## 5. Conclusions

This topic is plainly one where definitive conclusions are hard to reach, and Schorsch himself admits that he cannot present an entirely consistent thesis.<sup>887</sup> This is so because the nature of the evidence itself is contradictory, and it is further conceivable that Abrabanel's own stance altered at different phases of his life. But in any event, I consider that Schorsch's approach, as summarised above, requires revision in several respects. First, his assertion that Abrabanel mentions his former ownership of slaves in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua is erroneous. No such statement appears there, or, to my knowledge, anywhere else throughout his writings. Second, his statement that several rabbis sharing Abrabanel's background contain less denigrating portraits of Ham, and no debasement of Cushites, must be doubly qualified; not only did several of Abrabanel's exegetical predecessors express themselves at least as negatively towards Blacks as he does (as already demonstrated), but also, he goes out of his way to defend Blacks, from personal knowledge, against the charge of promiscuity levelled against them by Japheth and Ibn Ezra. Third, Schorsch's first three points relate only the issue of slavery rather than to Abrabanel's stance towards Blacks as such, and are thus strictly irrelevant to our theme. Quite possibly, too, Abrabanel, as an interpreter of Scripture, may have felt constrained to expound the passages dealing with issues of race and ethnicity in accordance with what he considered Scripture's true intent rather than his personal feelings.

6. My novel approach to this issue is to assess carefully every instance where Abrabanel touches upon the theme of race and ethnicity throughout his biblical exegesis. My conclusion, from all the available evidence, is that Abrabanel's position,

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<sup>887</sup> A. Sepinwall (California State University, San Marcos) pub. on H-Atlantic (December, 2005) – ‘the book lacks a single overarching thesis’.

though admittedly not entirely consistent, is relatively liberal; whilst, on the one hand, theoretically acknowledging Noah's curse of slavery upon Ham and his descendants as a fundamental, incontrovertible biblical truth, on the other, he eschews condemnation of Blacks in practice where this is unwarranted by empirical experience. He happily accords particular Cushite individuals mentioned in Scripture full credit for their praiseworthy actions, as evidenced by the relevant passages in II Samuel 18 and Jeremiah 38, highlighted in this connection. Moreover, as evident from his commentary to Amos 9:7, he totally rejects the idea of especial *black promiscuity*, which, as seen above, was embraced by several of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries, and his exegetical predecessors. He also rejects the literalistic interpretation of the narrative about Moses' Cushite wife in Numbers 12 (which is unfavourable to Blacks) and refuses to equate the admittedly (for him) repulsive black skin with moral turpitude.<sup>888</sup> Given that no-one, either in medieval or Renaissance times, advocated the total abolition of slavery, or denied the biblical curse of Noah upon Ham and his descendants, Abrabanel's overall stance was comparatively tolerant and enlightened.

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<sup>888</sup> In his commentary to Numbers 12:1, Abrabanel doubts the authenticity of the early medieval pseudo-*midrashic* work 'Divrei ha-Yamim shel Moshe Rabbenu', incorporating the legend of Moses having spent forty years as King of Cush, and there marrying a Cushite princess, with whom he declined to consummate his union because of the curse placed on Ham's descendants.

## Chapter Eight

### Reception History of Abrabanel's Biblical Commentaries

#### 1. Among Jews

Rabinowitz, in his 1937 Cambridge lecture on Abrabanel, lamented the general neglect of Abrabanel's biblical commentaries within Jewish circles.<sup>889</sup> He did not distinguish in this connection between Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, though arguably such a distinction could legitimately have been drawn. The function of this chapter will be to trace the Reception History of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis throughout Jewry over the past five centuries; first, to establish the validity of Rabinowitz's observation (supported by Gaster in his own Cambridge lecture on Abrabanel in the same year) and secondly, should it be found correct, to trace and analyse the potential reasons for such neglect.<sup>890</sup> Notably, however, no explicit statement is ever made in the classical literature as to what such reasons are, or might be; they must largely be inferred through comparison with the major features of other commentators whose works have historically enjoyed a consistently higher degree of popularity than Abrabanel's.

#### 1.1 Factors Potentially Contributing towards Abrabanel's Commentaries' Relative Unpopularity

- The locations where they were printed.
- Abrabanel having been a Sephardi. This *might* in itself have contributed towards Ashkenazi neglect, though this factor is certainly not conclusive, as is evident from the examples of the pentateuchal commentaries of the Sephardim

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<sup>889</sup> Rabinowitz: 'Abravanel as Exegete', 77-92.

<sup>890</sup> Gaster: 'Abravanel's Literary Work', 41-73.

Nahmanides (13th cent.) and Or ha-Hayyim (17th cent.), which have both enjoyed continuous popularity since the time of their composition.

- Abrabanel's exceptional stylistic prolixity, which may have rendered his exegesis less 'user-friendly' than that of other exegetes. As a corollary to this, it was evidently those commentaries that were sufficiently brief to allow them to be printed in the margins of the standard rabbinic Bibles that clearly had the distinct advantage of accessibility over those, such as Abrabanel's, which were not.
- His fairly frequent deviations, and instances of dissent, from the *midrashic* tradition acknowledged as normative by rabbinic circles and the masses over the centuries.
- His relatively scant references to the Kabbalah, the mystic lore which became extremely popular amongst both Sephardim and Ashkenazim from the 16th century onward.
- His frequent citations of Christian, Muslim and classical, pagan sources, occasionally even favouring Christian over Jewish ones.
- The fact that Abrabanel, unlike other commentators such as Solomon Ephraim Luntschitz, author of 'K'li Yakar' (16<sup>th</sup>/17th cent.), or his own contemporary Isaac Arama, author of 'Aqedat Yitzhak', was not a homiletical preacher, and thus lacked mass appeal.
- The fact that Abrabanel, unlike Rashi or Nahmanides, was not a renowned Talmudic commentator. (Undoubtedly, by the 16th century, Talmudic expertise was considered a prerequisite for Jewish scholarship, certainly within traditionalist Ashkenazi circles – Solomon Luria's criticism of Ibn Ezra

that he was not proficient in Talmud having already been cited in this connection.)

- The fact that Abrabanel not only frequently criticises the views of his illustrious exegetical predecessors, but occasionally employs harsh language for this purpose, which might be regarded as a mark of disrespect.

Each of these potential factors will subsequently be subjected to critical analysis.

## 1.2 Traditionalist Exegetes Influenced by Abrabanel's Exegesis

Meanwhile, however, it is important to list those traditionalist biblical commentators known to me who did study in depth, and, in general, endorse, Abrabanel's exegesis, often most enthusiastically. Amongst these, in chronological sequence, are:

A. Rabbi Solomon Ephraim Luntschitz, an outstanding Ashkenazi scholar and influential homiletical preacher resident in Poland, and later in Prague, whose pentateuchal commentary, 'K'li Yakar', printed in all the standard editions of Mikra'ot Gedolot, has remained perennially popular.<sup>891</sup> In his Introduction to the recently-published two-volume edition, the editor states that Abrabanel is one of Luntschitz's most frequently-cited commentators.<sup>892</sup> Eleven quotations from Abrabanel's pentateuchal commentary appear in Luntschitz's commentary to Genesis and Exodus alone.<sup>893</sup> The number of citations of Abrabanel in K'li Yakar to Leviticus-Deuteronomy, twelve, is equally significant.<sup>894</sup> This is, superficially, somewhat surprising, as Luntschitz lived in Eastern Europe, in a cultural and intellectual

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<sup>891</sup> Original edition published Lublin, 1602.

<sup>892</sup> Luntschitz: Complete Version of K'li Yakar (Bnei Brak, 1985) 1, 5.

<sup>893</sup> Ibid. 52-53, 122, 154, 157, 178, 183, 213, 234, 293, 300, 343.

<sup>894</sup> Ibid. 2: 377, 439 (twice), 444, 478, 486, 508, 568, 587, 592, 618, 638.

environment far removed from Abrabanel's. Moreover, Luntschitz was primarily a homilist, whereas Abrabanel was chiefly an exponent of the *P'shat*. Nonetheless, Luntschitz's frequent references to Abrabanel reflect the great renown Abrabanel had already achieved, even within the Ashkenazi world, as a major thinker and biblical exegete, within less than a century after his death. It is accordingly ironic that he seems to have gone into eclipse, certainly within learned Ashkenazi circles, until his revival by R. David Altschuler (author of 'Metzudat Zion' and 'Metzudat David') in the 18th century.<sup>895</sup> The reason for this probably lies in the ever-narrowing intellectual horizons of Eastern European Jewry during that period, marked by growing insularity due to almost incessant external persecution.

A close examination of Luntschitz's citations of Abrabanel reveals that *on the whole* he cites him either neutrally or approvingly, occasionally adding his own alternative interpretation or presenting supplementary arguments in his support. In one instance, on the well-known verse in Genesis 'lo yasur shevet mi'Yehudah',<sup>896</sup> he refers the reader to Abrabanel's comprehensive compendium of all the numerous alternative exegetical interpretations of this key phrase advanced to date.<sup>897</sup> In several other instances too, he acknowledges Abrabanel's vital importance as a *collator* of previous commentators' views.<sup>898</sup> However, he is not wholly complimentary, occasionally displaying a critical spirit. In one case he states that Abrabanel's explanation seems incorrect to him;<sup>899</sup> in another, that Abrabanel's reason for the Torah juxtaposing one

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<sup>895</sup> See Section C on Altschuler, pp.360-361.

<sup>896</sup> Genesis 49:10.

<sup>897</sup> See Luntschitz: K'li Yakar I, 183.

<sup>898</sup> Ibid. II, 508, 587.

<sup>899</sup> Ibid. I, 293.

particular passage to others is ‘weak’,<sup>900</sup> and in yet a third, that Abrabanel’s interpretation of a passage is insufficient to resolve all the problems it presents.<sup>901</sup>

Luntschitz was probably attracted to Abrabanel’s exegesis because of the broad scope of his scriptural interpretations. For Abrabanel, though essentially an exponent of the ‘*P’shat*’, also incorporated *midrashic*, ethical, moralistic and philosophical ideas to which Luntschitz could readily relate.

The editor of the Bnei Brak edition of *K’li Yakar*, in his Introduction, interestingly states that Luntschitz’s name, in his capacity as one of the leading rabbinical figures on the Jewish ‘Council of Three Lands’,<sup>902</sup> and the first signatory to its enactments, appears, alongside those of various other renowned scholars, as signatory to the Council’s following decree of 1603:

‘When the leaders of the people assembled together here, in Jaroslav, in the year 5363,<sup>903</sup> to monitor matters concerning the printing of the new books that have recently arrived, we agreed to permit the printers to publish the work composed by the ‘Gaon’,<sup>904</sup> our teacher, Rabbi Jacob son of Eliakim<sup>905</sup> ... an abridged version of the works of our teacher, the Rabbi Abrabanel...’<sup>906</sup>

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<sup>900</sup> Ibid. II, 592.

<sup>901</sup> Ibid. 618.

<sup>902</sup> This body, more commonly referred to as the Council of the Four Lands, was the central institution of Jewish self-government in Poland from c.1550 to its dissolution in 1764.

<sup>903</sup> In accordance with the traditional Jewish calendar, commencing from the biblical date of Creation.

<sup>904</sup> The customary title conferred upon an outstanding rabbinic luminary, denoting academic brilliance.

<sup>905</sup> Despite this laudatory title, little further information exists about him. No relevant entry appears in the current *Encyclopedia Judaica*. However, the abridged version, appearing in 1604 under the title “Sefer Kitzur Abrabanel asher hibber Morenu Ya’akov”, is listed in the Catalogue of Hebrew Books in the British Museum (J. Zedner: London, 1964) 300, where the compiler’s surname is given as Heilprun.

<sup>906</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

This enactment shows how highly Abrabanel's writings were already esteemed in Poland in that era, and also the importance attached to the *accessibility* of his works by the masses, who would have found Abrabanel's expansive literary style beyond them.

B. Rabbi Jacob Fidanque, a 17th century Sephardi resident of Hamburg who composed a commentary on various selected portions of the Former Prophets, which, as explained in his Introduction, contains a collation of excerpts from the exegesis of various renowned commentators succeeding Abrabanel, plus his own ideas. Fidanque's relationship to Abrabanel's commentary on the Former Prophets, which he arranged to have printed together with his own in Hamburg in 1687, and appears in the edition used by me, is revealingly described by him in that Introduction, composed in conventionally rhetorical style, as follows:

‘...I said: “It is time to act for the Lord, to get printed an ancient work unavailable to us here today, and I set my mind to search... amongst the holy men... (alive in former times) on earth, who concerned themselves with scriptural interpretation; and the Lord stirred up within my spirit the work of the ‘Prince’, Abrabanel, on the Prophets and... Hagiographa, who enlightens the earth and its inhabitants with expositions more delightful than gold, sweeter than honey... shining as the brightness of the firmament, whose fruit is entirely sanctified in praise (of God), a well of living waters... moreover, he cites... the expositions of his exegetical precursors, such as Rashi, Radak, (Ralbag), the (author of the) ‘Ephod’ and the author of the ‘Ikkarim’ (i.e. the philosopher Joseph Albo), so that everything is contained within it”. And then I said:

"Is this not good? Let me make select choice of him and seek him in every nook and cranny!" ...<sup>907</sup>

Fidanque indeed cites Abrabanel's views several times in his own commentaries, and, notably, appreciates the value of Abrabanel's digests of earlier exegetes. However, in marked contrast to the unstinting praise contained in his Introduction, his tone turns notably frostier when discussing Abrabanel's radical exposition of the episode, related in II Samuel 11 & 12, concerning King David's conduct in regard to Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite, and he plainly seeks to distance himself from Abrabanel's stance. He commences his own elaborate exposition of the relevant passage ominously, as follows:

'... I have been constrained to speak about the episode of David and Bathsheba, as I have seen that this Rabbi Abrabanel...magnified David's sin on several counts; but I say that the truth lies with our Sages..., for their words are those of tradition, that anyone who went forth (to fight in) the wars of the House of David would write a bill of divorce for his wife...'<sup>908</sup>

For Fidanque, Abrabanel has here gone beyond the pale, severing links with hallowed Talmudic tradition. As will presently be seen, his stance of protest resembles that of the far more renowned biblical commentator Malbim some two centuries later.<sup>909</sup>

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<sup>907</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Former Prophets, 1. (Introduction of Jacob Fidanque)

<sup>908</sup> Ibid.345.

<sup>909</sup> See Section E on Malbim, pp.362-366.

Another instance where Fidanque criticises Abrabanel's approach occurs in his exposition of the episode concerning Amnon and Tamar related in II Samuel 13. In this connection, he observes:

'Here the Rabbi (Abrabanel) has stepped beyond the boundaries of our Sages' words ... in this matter, involving one of the simple laws over which no controversy exists, namely, that two siblings who are born non-Jewish, and then become converted (to Judaism) - both they, their father and their mother -would be permitted to marry one another, were it not for a decree of our Sages... (prohibiting this) so that they should not say: "We have come from a higher (level of) sanctity to a lower one"...'<sup>910</sup>

Abrabanel had noted, in his comments on this passage, that the Sages' view that Amnon was *halakhically* permitted to marry Tamar, despite her being his half-sister, was irreconcilable with the text's plain meaning and simple logic. I do not propose to analyse the *halakhic* aspects of the case, but merely to illustrate how sensitive Fidanque (and others of his ilk) can become when Abrabanel displays his occasional tendencies towards intellectual independence. The contrast between Fidanque's unstinting praise for Abrabanel in his Introduction and the sharp tone of his criticisms in the two sample passages cited above is immense.

C. Rabbi David Altschuler, a popular 18th century Ashkenazi commentator on the Prophets and Hagiographa, whose works are entitled 'Metzudat Zion' and 'Metzudat David', respectively. In his general joint introduction to these commentaries, he lists Abrabanel as one of 'the seven existing pillars of biblical exegesis upon which the

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<sup>910</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Samuel, 351.

entire House of Israel rests', and upon which he has relied for his own commentaries.<sup>911</sup> The 'Metzudot' are brief, seldom including direct citations from earlier exegetes, but, as Altschuler himself expressly declares, he has drawn on Abrabanel for his own expositions.

D. Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (acronym 'Shadal'), a 19th century Italian biblical exegete, whose fundamental traditionalism and anti-philosophical outlook were somewhat tempered by the spirit of the Enlightenment. In his commentary to the Pentateuch, he cites Abrabanel several times.<sup>912</sup> In his Introduction, he lists Abrabanel among many other exegetes who occasionally interpret biblical verses contrary to either the traditional vowelled punctuation, or at least to the traditional cantillation accents. Interestingly, in his exegesis of Genesis 3:1, he challenges Abrabanel's comparatively radical opinion that the serpent in the Garden of Eden did not really speak, but simply consumed the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge without perishing, thereby allowing Eve to reason that she too could do likewise. On Exodus 1:15, he endorses Abrabanel's unconventional view that the midwives with whom Pharaoh communicated were Egyptians, not Israelites; and places Abrabanel, in this regard, alongside non-rabbinic sources such as the Septuagint, Jerome and Josephus.

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<sup>911</sup> Altschuler: Introduction to Commentary to Joshua: Mikra'ot Gedolot I (Prophets) (Jerusalem, 2001). The other six 'pillars' listed by him are: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ralbag (Gersonides), Radak (R. David Kimhi), Alshich (R. Moses Alsheikh) and 'Mikhlol Yofi', by R. Solomon ibn Melekh. These are universally regarded as classic rabbinic biblical commentaries.

<sup>912</sup> S.D.Luzzatto : Commentary to Pentateuch: (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Jerusalem, 1993) 1(in Introduction), 28 (on Gen:3:1),91 (on Gen:21:27), 171 (on Gen:42:4),176 (on Gen:43:7),183 (on Gen:45:28),186 (on Gen:47:18), 190 (on Gen:48:12), 194-95 (on Gen:48:12), 213 (on Ex:1;15), 359 (on Ex. 22:30), 472 (on Num:20:12), 537 (on Deut:20:19), 547 (on Deut:25:2) *et al.*

E. Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, one of the most influential 19th century traditionalist Ashkenazi biblical exegetes who, notwithstanding his immense Talmudic acumen, remained a firm exponent of *P'shat*, the literal/contextual meaning of the scriptural text. It is important to note, first, that Malbim is unique amongst the later traditional commentators in adopting (albeit in limited fashion) Abrabanel's 'question-and-answer' methodological technique. This in itself indicates the measure of Abrabanel's literary influence upon him. Regarding substantive exposition, Malbim's Introduction to his Commentary on the Prophets and Hagiographa, composed in 1866, speaks for itself:

'... I turned (my attention) to those who expounded Scripture after Kimhi... and there was no-one who had the strength to breathe the breath of life into the Scriptures by... exposition of the simple meaning, besides our teacher Rabbi Don Isaac Abrabanel, and a group of his colleagues who lived in his generation; and I have extracted pearls from the depths of their words, wherever their words found favour with me, and collated them by reference to their (respective) names; for the other commentators... inclined towards homiletical methods, with which we are not currently concerned...'<sup>913</sup>

There are several noteworthy instances of Malbim's citations from Abrabanel on the Book of Samuel in particular, some of which are indeed approbatory; but others, despite Malbim's glowing tribute, contain sharp criticisms of specific interpretations offered by him. To convey the full flavour of his overall intellectual and spiritual

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<sup>913</sup> Malbim: Commentary to Prophets and Hagiographa I (Joshua, Judges & Samuel) (Jerusalem, 1973): General Introduction, 2b.

stance towards Abrabanel's exegesis, let us consider several examples of his citations, gleaned both from Samuel and elsewhere in Scripture.

- On Numbers 11:1, Malbim endorses Abrabanel's interpretation of the true nature of the sin of the '*mitonenim*' ('complainers') enigmatically alluded to in that verse ( harbouring sceptical notions about the extent of Divine power).<sup>914</sup>
- On Numbers 33:5, he espouses three novel reasons advanced by Abrabanel as to why Moses needed to record for posterity the Israelites' precise peregrinations through the desert.<sup>915</sup>
- On Numbers 34:17-19, Malbim endorses Abrabanel's idea that God assuaged Moses' grief at being unable to enter the Promised Land by permitting him to delegate, in advance, the arrangements for its conquest, establishment of the cities of refuge, settlement of its borders and assignment to each individual tribe of its territorial boundaries – such delegation being the legal and psychological equivalent of his personal performance of these duties.<sup>916</sup>

These cases demonstrate that Malbim is fully prepared to embrace Abrabanel's originality of thought in regard to biblical exposition in *non-controversial* areas.

It is further significant that Malbim chooses to cite Abrabanel's view (again approvingly) at the very commencement of his own commentary to the Book of Kings, as to why the final events of King David's life are recorded there rather than in the Book of Samuel, dealing with David's reign as a whole.<sup>917</sup> This again illustrates the importance attached by Malbim to Abrabanel as a biblical exegete.

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<sup>914</sup> Idem: Commentary to the Pentateuch (Numbers) (Jerusalem, 1956) 156.

<sup>915</sup> Ibid. 463.

<sup>916</sup> Ibid. 473.

<sup>917</sup> Idem: Commentary to Prophets & Hagiographa (Kings & Chronicles) (Jerusalem, 1973) 2a.

Another intriguing instance where Malbim cites Abrabanel at length (though ultimately dismissing his view), occurs in his comments on I Samuel 17:8, dealing with David's combat with the Philistine giant Goliath.<sup>918</sup> Abrabanel himself quotes the opinion of some anonymous 'sages', that Goliath's challenge to the Israelite host in battle array to select a champion to confront him in single combat accorded with the rules of chivalry still prevalent in his day in Christian and Muslim lands, and must be so understood. Abrabanel firmly rejects this view, offering several reasons as to why Goliath's challenge was wholly different, amounting only to provocative taunting. Somewhat surprisingly, Malbim dissents from Abrabanel, and seems partially prepared to adopt the more radical view. Here, then, ironically, we find Malbim more inclined towards a 'modernistic' approach than Abrabanel, champion of the historical approach to biblical interpretation!

Perhaps the most fascinating case of all is that of Malbim's treatment of Abrabanel's revolutionary view of King David's conduct in relation to Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite - the very matter to which Fidanque took such extreme exception. On the phrase in II Samuel 11:3: 'Is this not Bathsheba...?' Malbim comments:

'... Rabbi... Isaac Abrabanel condemned David excessively, and explained that he sinned on five counts:

- ... (By adultery) with a married woman; ... he (Abrabanel) does not wish to accept our Sages'... words that she was divorced from Uriah, as this runs counter to the plain meaning of the biblical text.
- By endeavouring to arrange for Uriah to lie with his wife so that the child who

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<sup>918</sup> Idem: Commentary to Joshua, Judges & Samuel, 44b.

might be born (of David's union with Bathsheba) might be regarded as his (Uriah's), thus causing his name to be excised from his father's house...

- By ordering Uriah to be placed in the heat of the battle... to have him killed despite there being no violence in his hands... it would have been preferable to impede... him until Bathsheba had secretly given birth, when the king could have delivered the newborn babe to a nursing-woman without anyone's knowledge.
- By slaying him through the sword of the Ammonites, and with him... many worthy Israelite men, when he could have arranged to have him slain clandestinely by Israelites.
- By taking Bathsheba forthwith into his household, as though still smitten with lustful desires.

...His (Abrabanel's) view, then, is that he (David) indeed sinned many times over, and... only because of his repentance was his sin overlooked, and he accepted his punishment and became purified. However, when considered from the correct perspective, our Sages' view is compelling; for if she were a married woman, how could he (David) have subsequently taken her to wife – for was she not prohibited to the adulterer?... how could he have fasted and prayed that the child due to be born should live, as he would have been a '*mamzer*'?<sup>919</sup>...how was his repentance accepted whilst the woman prohibited to him by Torah law still resided in his household... And how could God have selected a tribe of rulers from the seed born from this woman...

alled his name 'friend of God', and loved him?

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<sup>919</sup> 'Mamzer', conventionally translated 'bastard'; appearing in Deuteronomy 23:3, is rabbinically interpreted to denote one born of an adulterous or incestuous union.

From all this it is... clear that Bathsheba was not prohibited to David, since one going forth to battle at that time would write a bill of divorce for his wife... David can thus be exonerated from Abrabanel's charges against him...<sup>920</sup>

Here Malbim, the traditionalist, despite his general veneration for Abrabanel as an authoritative exponent of the '*P'shat*', feels constrained to protest at his excessive radicalism. Openly to condemn the great King David, a universally acknowledged saint and messianic figure within Judaism, as an adulterer and murderer was, for Malbim, simply 'a bridge too far'. Abrabanel indeed stands alone among the traditional Jewish commentators in his revolutionary approach to this issue.

Finally, Malbim vehemently assails Abrabanel's radical view that the literary style, and even grammar, of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were deficient and markedly inferior to that of Isaiah. To express such a criticism of the inspired prophets was virtually unprecedented in Abrabanel's day.

F. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, an enlightened traditionalist Judeo-German rabbinic scholar and biblical exegete active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hoffman was Rector of Berlin's Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, a 'Modern Orthodox'-type institution, for many years, and composed (*inter alia*) scholarly commentaries on Leviticus and Deuteronomy, with a view to refuting the Wellhausen school of biblical criticism.<sup>921</sup> He cites Abrabanel several times.

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<sup>920</sup> Malbim: Commentary to Joshua, Judges & Samuel, 98b-99a.

<sup>921</sup> D.Z.Hoffman: Commentary to Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Jerusalem, 1953/54).

#### G. Miscellaneous Other Authorities citing Abrabanel

Besides these official commentators, the renowned 17th century Dutch scholar Menasseh b. Israel, who petitioned Cromwell to permit Jewish return to England, in his exegetical biblical work, ‘Conciliador’ (composed in Spanish and printed in Amsterdam in 1639), frequently refers to Abrabanel, utilising his arguments to reconcile apparent contradictions and difficulties in the biblical text. However, he too does not invariably endorse Abrabanel’s views, a classic example of this being noted by Strauss, who notes Menasseh’s protest at Abrabanel’s untraditional anti-monarchical stance.<sup>922</sup> Strauss also cites a similar protest on this matter by the renowned 16th century *kabbalistic* biblical commentator Moses Alsheikh (‘Alshich’).<sup>923</sup>

Lawee additionally draws attention to the criticism of Abrabanel by Jacob b. Hayyim ibn Adonijah, editor of the famous 1524 rabbinic Bible, and his colleague Elijah Levita, for expressing the radical notion that the *ketiv/keri* phenomenon (where a biblical word is written in one way but read in another), was due to the fact that Ezra the Scribe felt that certain scriptural expressions ‘lacked precision’ and accordingly needed correction.<sup>924</sup> The renowned Rabbi Judah Loewe of Prague (‘Maharal’) also attacked Abrabanel for this.<sup>925</sup>

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<sup>922</sup> Strauss: ‘On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching’: in Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 119 fn.1.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid., citing Alshich: Mar’ot ha-Tzove’ot to I Samuel 8:6. See also Alshich to Deuteronomy, ed. H. Wagschall (Jerusalem, 1990) 207-208.

<sup>924</sup> Lawee: ‘From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship’ in: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment’ ed. M.Saebo (Gottingen, 2008) 212.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid., citing Maharal: Tiferet Yisrael ch.66 in: Sifrei Maharal (Bnei Brak: Yahadut (1980) 198-199.

Further criticism of Abrabanel appears in the work of the 17th century Syrian exegete Samuel Laniado, who chided him for ascribing to Ezra, as author of the Book of Chronicles, a misunderstanding, incorporated into II Chronicles 20:36, regarding the meaning of a particular passage in I Kings 22:49 about the ships of Tarshish constructed by King Jehoshaphat.<sup>926</sup> He is further assailed, for his cavalier attitude towards Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's literary style, by the 18th century Ashkenazi grammarian Solomon Zalman Hanau.<sup>927</sup>

Another fascinating personality significantly influenced by Abrabanel's biblical exegesis was Saul Levi Morteira, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Sephardic Rabbi resident in Amsterdam, who quoted him extensively in his sermons, which he subsequently published.<sup>928</sup>

In the late 20th century, Abrabanel is cited several times in the ultra-orthodox 'ArtScroll' series of commentaries, in English, on the Pentateuch and Prophets.<sup>929</sup> (It is, however, noteworthy that ArtScroll citations of Abrabanel are significantly fewer than of other commentators, e.g. Rashi, Nahmanides, Sforno and Or ha-Hayyim.) Likewise, copious citations of Abrabanel occur in the multi-volume 'Judaica Press' compendium of classical commentaries on the Scriptures compiled by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg.<sup>930</sup> From the 'Modern Orthodox' perspective, Nechama Leibowitz, former Professor of Bible at Tel Aviv University, in her detailed 'Studies in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy' respectively, includes numerous citations and

<sup>926</sup> Ibid. 213, citing K'li Yakar: perush nevi'im rishonim, Melakhim 1-2 (Jerusalem: Makhon ha-Ketav 1988), 1, 422-424.

<sup>927</sup> Ibid.

<sup>928</sup> See M. Saperstein: Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of New Jews (Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 2005).

<sup>929</sup> E.g. Artscroll Series – The Chumash (N.Y. 1994)27, 40, 61, 218-19, 845 et al.

<sup>930</sup> Judaica Press (N.Y.1993 & onwards).

analyses of Abrabanel's comments and views.<sup>931</sup> Finally, the scholarly JPS Torah Commentary, representing Judaism's Conservative wing, also includes numerous citations of Abrabanel.

### 1.3 Commentators Not Citing Abrabanel

My researches have further revealed that at least two major traditionalist commentators fail to refer to Abrabanel. These are: R. Obadiah Sforno, the classic 16th century Italian commentator on the Pentateuch, and R. Hayyim Ibn Attar, the 17th century Moroccan exegete ('Or ha-Hayyim'). In Ibn Attar's case, the reason is probably that Abrabanel simply did not fit into his own distinctly *kabbalistic* mould. Sforno's silence too is unsurprising, as he does not customarily cite earlier authorities.

(It will be recalled from my biographical chapter that Abrabanel was heavily criticised by David Messer Leon, on intellectual grounds, and Meir Arama, son of the renowned Isaac Arama, for plagiarism of his father's writings. These authorities are, however, deliberately excluded from consideration in the present study, as their criticisms, directed mainly at his philosophical and theological works, are irrelevant here.)

### 1.4 Conclusions from Evidence of Classical Jewish Biblical Exegetes

With few exceptions, Abrabanel as a biblical exegete enjoys great respect and veneration amongst both Sephardi and Ashkenazi commentators. Within Sephardi

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<sup>931</sup> N. Leibowitz: Studies in Bereshit (Jerusalem, 1973); Studies in Shemot: Parts I &II (Jerusalem, 1986- 6<sup>th</sup> ed.); Studies in Vayikra (Jerusalem, 1983); Studies in Bamidbar (Jerusalem, 1980); Studies in Devarim (Jerusalem, 1980) – all trans.and adapted from Heb. by A. Newman.

circles, however, it seems that besides Menasseh b. Israel (better known as Jewish diplomat than as biblical exegete), Jacob Fidanque (a relatively obscure figure), Samuel Laniado (another little-known exegete) and Shadal, the rather eclectic Italian commentator, no-one actually *cites* Abrabanel. Shadal himself is regarded with some suspicion by the ultra-orthodox for his citations of Gentile biblical scholars, and *even he* occasionally criticises Abrabanel for what he deems his excessive rationalism. I contend that the neglect of Abrabanel is precisely because of the ever-increasing emphasis of the post-16th century Sephardi scholars on *midrashic* and *kabbalistic* exegesis, to the virtual exclusion of the ‘*P’shat*’-mode of interpretation. Abrabanel, on his own admission, and *pace* Netanyahu, was not primarily a *kabbalist*, and his stance towards Midrash was perhaps somewhat over-sophisticated for the latter-day Sephardi sages.

Ironically, after the short-lived enthusiastic reception of Abrabanel’s pentateuchal exegesis by the Ashkenazi homilist Luntschitz in the 16th/17th centuries, it was his wholesale endorsement by Altschuler in the 18th, and, far more so, by Malbim in the 19th, that conferred upon Abrabanel a new lease of life within Ashkenazi circles. Whilst Altschuler’s endorsement was of comparatively little importance, as his commentaries covered the Prophets and Hagiographa only, not the Pentateuch, Malbim’s enthusiastic reception was entirely different. He was acknowledged as a Talmudic savant throughout Eastern Europe, whose adherence to tradition was indisputable – and it was largely he who was responsible for rendering extensive ‘*P’shat*’-mode biblical exegesis fully acceptable again amongst orthodox Ashkenazim.

Notwithstanding Rabinowitz's significant testimony, recording the situation in the early 20th century, that Abrabanel's commentaries were then still largely neglected, the tide has since turned heavily in Abrabanel's favour. As has been seen, he is now cited virtually right across the contemporary religious spectrum, by the ultra-orthodox ArtScroll and Judaica Press series of biblical commentaries, by Nechama Leibowitz, the 'Modern Orthodox' Israeli biblical scholar and populariser of scriptural exegesis, and by the JPS Commentary on the Torah, representing Judaism's Conservative movement. Nonetheless, it seems he still has a fairly long way to go before being permitted to join the august ranks of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak and Nahmanides.

### 1.5 Contemporary Anecdotal Evidence

Before analysing the potential reasons listed above for the general traditional and contemporary neglect of Abrabanel's biblical commentaries, I shall complete the picture by adducing current anecdotal evidence gleaned personally from various sources, all emanating from the orthodox tradition, from which I myself hail. By their very informal and casual nature, the value to be placed upon these is somewhat uncertain, but it has been decided to include them here for the sake of completeness.

- An acquaintance, hailing from an ultra-orthodox, extended Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem, the 'Edah ha-Haredit', confirmed to me that Abrabanel is deemed by his community to have the status of a '*makhri'a*' (one generally regarded as possessing the authority to decide between two conflicting earlier opinions on matters of religious law or scriptural exegesis). Thus a '*makhri'a*' enjoys a level of authority halfway between that of the 'Rishonim' (the early medieval *halakhic* authorities, e.g. Rashi or Nahmanides) on the one hand, and the 'Aharonim' (the post-15th century

authorities, e.g. Solomon Luria, Shabbetai Kohen), on the other. Interestingly, Abrabanel indeed often personally assumes the mantle of authority of a ‘Decisor’ in regard to the conflicting views of his various exegetical predecessors. (However, he frequently goes one step further, rejecting *all* prior opinions.) Intriguingly, however, Rabbi Y. Kamenetsky, a major 20<sup>th</sup> century American authority of the Lithuanian tradition, stated, informally, that neither Abrabanel nor Ibn Ezra should be ranked among the ‘Decisors’, because they interpret Scripture in accordance with its plain meaning, and did not take rabbinic tradition into account.<sup>932</sup>

- A prominent Sephardi rabbi of a North-West London Moroccan community informed me that Abrabanel possesses a status amongst them second only to that of Maimonides. He was presumably referring to the realm of Jewish theology and biblical exegesis only, not to that of *halakhah*.
- A London ultra-orthodox Ashkenazi rabbi indicated that Abrabanel’s commentaries were not as ‘authoritative’ as those of Nahmanides.
- Within contemporary orthodox Ashkenazi circles, one frequently hears complaints that Abrabanel’s commentaries are too elaborate for detailed study, as most people lack the patience to wade through such voluminous and repetitious material, notwithstanding its undoubtedly ingenuity and profundity.

#### 1.5.1 Conclusions from Contemporary Anecdotal Evidence

It appears from the above, admittedly sketchy outline, that Abrabanel enjoys greater popularity among latter-day Sephardim than among Ashkenazim. Though his elevated status as a traditional biblical commentator is beyond question in all circles, in

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<sup>932</sup> Y. Kamenetsky: *Emet le-Yaakov* (N.Y.1998) 283, fn.45.

practice his exegesis is relatively neglected, and certainly favoured less than that of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Sforno and Or ha-Hayyim.

## 1.6 Analysis of Reasons in 1.1 for Relative Unpopularity of Abrabanel's Exegesis

### 1.6.1 The Locations where his Commentaries were printed

In late medieval and early modern times, due to the slowness of communications, Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, were probably only vaguely aware of their co-religionists on the Iberian Peninsula or in the Middle East, and *vice versa*. Accordingly, although Abrabanel was a household name amongst Iberian Jewry and their direct descendants subsequently residing in Italy, Greece or Turkey, it is likely that the masses living contemporaneously in, say, faraway Lithuania, had either scarcely heard of him, or had little appreciation of his historical significance. Consequently, if Abrabanel's commentaries were to be printed in Eastern Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup>/18th centuries, they might have little impact.

### 1.6.2 Abrabanel being a Sephardi

Here we must consider whether Sephardim and Ashkenazim possessed an innate bias against one another's prior literary compositions. It has already been noted that both Nahmanides' and Ibn Attar's pentateuchal commentaries, though authored by Sephardim, enjoyed perennial popularity amongst Ashkenazi Jewry, but several important additional factors operated in their case to enhance such popularity. First, their commentaries were replete with *kabbalistic* motifs and themes – and, since the advent of R. Isaac Luria (16th century), the Kabbalah had captured the hearts and minds of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry alike. Whilst Abrabanel himself admittedly incorporated some *kabbalistic* ideas within his commentaries, e.g. reincarnation, they

were certainly not central features of his exegesis. Abrabanel has been aptly described, by Waxman in his monumental multi-volume work ‘History of Jewish Literature’ (cited above), as a ‘*conservative rationalist*’, imbued strongly with the Renaissance humanistic spirit of which Ashkenazi Jewry had little appreciation.<sup>933</sup> Another factor militating against the popularity of Abrabanel’s commentaries within Ashkenazi rabbinic circles is, I believe, that he was not widely renowned as a Talmudist. Although, as noted above, no less an *halakhic* authority than Joseph Karo had conferred upon him the accolade ‘the great eagle’, Abrabanel, unlike Nahmanides, had written no commentaries or *novellae* on the Talmud (besides his commentary on the homiletical *mishnaic* tractate ‘Avot’).

Accordingly, it appears that Abrabanel being a Sephardi did not in itself constitute an overwhelming obstacle to his literary acceptance within Ashkenazi circles; it was the fact that they regarded him as a *rationalist* Sephardi, and as a ‘Renaissance man’, that was paramount. It is further significant that Maharal, one of the leading Ashkenazi Talmudic and *kabbalistic* authorities in the 16th/17th centuries, seems to have conducted a running polemic against Abrabanel’s historical/rationalist/non-*kabbalistic* mode of thought in his work ‘Gevurot Hashem’, though actually referring to him by name only very rarely in his numerous works.<sup>934</sup>

### 1.6.3 Stylistic Prolixity

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<sup>933</sup> Waxman: History of Jewish Literature (N.Y. 1943) 44-45; 50.

<sup>934</sup> I was informed by one Rabbi Y. Hartman, an acknowledged contemporary orthodox authority on Maharal, that he believes the only occasion throughout Maharal’s copious works where he mentions Abrabanel by name is in his commentary ‘Derekh Hayyim’ to Avot (6:3). However, there is another reference to him in *Tiferet Yisrael*, ch.66, cited above (see fn.925).

This is one of the factors cited in the contemporary anecdotal evidence militating against the popularity of Abrabanel's scriptural commentaries. It would appear that these, both on the Pentateuch and the Prophets, are lengthier than any other traditional Jewish commentator's. They are also frequently repetitious. Such verbosity must have irritated many a casual reader.<sup>935</sup> It carried the additional disadvantage that spatial exigencies precluded his commentaries being printed in the margins of the standard rabbinic Bibles which Italian, German and Eastern European printers were producing for the Jewish masses during the 16th and 17th centuries. Hence there was no ready accessibility to them, as they had to be published in separate volumes. It was commentaries such as Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Sforno, K'li Yakar and Or ha-Hayyim, which were sufficiently brief to be printed alongside the biblical text, which achieved the greatest popularity.

#### 1.6.4 Deviations from Established *Midrashic* Tradition

Whilst Abrabanel was certainly not alone amongst the classic pentateuchal commentators in deviating from the *midrashic* model – one need only think of the early medieval commentators Joseph Kara, Joseph Bekhor Shor, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Joseph Ibn Kaspi in this connection – I believe that it is this very factor – their bold, independent spirit - that has contributed towards their relative lack of mass popular appeal. The first two mentioned, though sound grammarians and exponents of virtually unadulterated ‘*P’shat*’, are all but ignored today except by specialist scholars. Rashbam’s commentary is generally considered arid (attracting just three super-commentaries over the past 900 years, as against about one hundred-and-fifty

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<sup>935</sup> Abrabanel's verbosity is indeed expressly criticised by Rabinowitz, Gaster and Ruiz. Abrabanel himself, however, in his commentary to Joshua 13, seemingly aware of his vulnerability to criticism on this score, insists that his interpretations contain nothing superfluous.

on Ibn Ezra). The latter, though scintillating, has been viewed with some caution by strict traditionalists, and Ibn Kaspi, condemned even by Abrabanel himself as a super-rationalist, has been relegated to the fringes of traditional Jewish exegetical study. I do not seek to make any intellectual judgment on this; merely to pinpoint it as a demonstrable historical phenomenon. Within Yeshivah circles, the most popular commentaries on the Pentateuch have long been those of Rashi, Nahmanides and Or ha-Hayyim, all of whom interweave a great amount of *midrashic* material into their expositions.

I would additionally contend that, in Abrabanel's case, it is not only his deviations in themselves, but their frequently radical nature and the bold manner in which he chooses to express them that have worried strictly traditional circles. A man who can readily opine – contrary to the whole tenor of the *midrashic* exposition of Genesis 22 - that the Patriarch Isaac was not even aware, until the moment he saw his father's sacrificial knife descending onto his throat, that *he* had been selected as the sacrificial victim,<sup>936</sup> or that King David (*pace* the normative view in the Babylonian Talmud<sup>937</sup> and subsequent mainstream rabbinic teaching) was indeed guilty of adultery and murder in the case of Bathsheba and Uriah, must have invited considerable suspicion amongst diehard traditionalists.

#### 1.6.5 Scant References to the Kabbalah

Despite the firm view of Abrabanel's leading biographer, Netanyahu, to the contrary, I maintain, in accordance with the majority opinion amongst current academics, that Abrabanel was, essentially, not a mystic. As has been argued in Chapter One, the

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<sup>936</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 265-272.

<sup>937</sup> Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 56a.

mere fact that he introduces the concept of reincarnation into his pentateuchal commentary, and defends it against its opponents, does not seriously challenge this conclusion – reincarnation was, by Abrabanel's time, a generally accepted notion within mainstream Judaism, and thus he felt obliged to adopt it. It is also conceivable that Abrabanel pragmatically chose to employ *kabbalistic* concepts on occasion as a useful bulwark against the ever-increasing menace of *extreme* rationalism, a trend of thought to which he was vehemently opposed.<sup>938</sup> He expressly declares several times throughout his biblical exegesis '*I have no concern with the hidden mysteries*', or makes similar disclaimers.<sup>939</sup> Whilst admittedly some of the major earlier normative commentators, e.g. Rashi and Radak, had likewise eschewed Kabbalah, ever since Nahmanides and the appearance of the Zohar, the most authoritative Jewish mystical work, in the late 13th century, normative Judaism had increasingly incorporated the mystic lore as one of its indispensable components, and those thinkers ignoring or challenging its supremacy simply lacked popular appeal.

#### 1.6.6 Frequent Citation of Gentile Sources

To my knowledge, the only major earlier commentators citing Gentile sources (discounting mere linguistic or grammatical parallels from cognate languages or vernacular translations of individual Hebrew words) were Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides (in his Guide to the Perplexed). Abrabanel, however, readily cites and discusses the views of pagan Greek philosophers, Church Fathers and Christian scholastics. Citations from Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Porphyry, Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Aquinas, Nicholas de Lyra and Bishop Paul of Burgos (*inter alia*) are interspersed throughout

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<sup>938</sup> Abrabanel: Commentary to Genesis, 65, citing the Zohar; also 72, containing a reference to 'the Sages of the Kabbalah'.

<sup>939</sup> Ibid.115.

his commentaries, which also include references to specific events in Roman and subsequent European history. He calmly records some of his dialogues with contemporary Christian theologians on subjects such as the justification for divorce.<sup>940</sup> Indeed, on occasion he expressly declares his preference for Christian exegetical views over traditional Jewish ones, including those of Maimonides and R. Levi b. Gershon ('Ralbag'), (albeit on non-doctrinal issues).<sup>941</sup> He accords immense weight to the views of Paul of Burgos, despite his notorious apostasy and bitter hatred of his former co-religionists.<sup>942</sup> Remarkably also, Abrabanel cites the Travels of Sir John de Mandeville (in confirmation of the site of the prophet Ezekiel's tomb), notwithstanding its numerous viciously anti-Jewish references.<sup>943</sup> Although during the earlier medieval period, such broad-minded thinking had been acceptable within Iberian Jewry, by Abrabanel's time a reaction had set in, and many traditionalist preachers were attributing the Jews' recent tribulations and their expulsion from Spain, to Divine punishment for their rampant assimilation. Thus the general tone of Abrabanel's biblical exegesis ran counter to the prevailing trends of the times, which continued unabated during later centuries. Within Ashkenazi circles, there had been little inclination to adopt any of the surrounding Gentile culture or ideology in any event. I contend, therefore, that Abrabanel's liberal approach to biblical exegesis militated against the whole-hearted endorsement of his exegesis during the early modern era.

#### 1.6.7 Not being a Homiletic Preacher

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<sup>940</sup> Idem: Commentary to Deuteronomy, 221-222.

<sup>941</sup> Idem: Commentary to Kings, 520, commenting on I Kings 8 (Reply to 6<sup>th</sup> Question).

<sup>942</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>943</sup> See p.10.

By Abrabanel's day, it had become fashionable for the masses, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi, to assemble to hear and imbibe the religious and ethical messages conveyed in public discourses, generally on Sabbaths and Festivals, by homiletical preachers. Some of these were renowned scholars, such as Nissim Gerondi ('Ran') in the 14th century, Isaac Arama in the 15th, and Luntschitz in the 16th, all of whose commentaries are collations of their series of oral discourses. It is true that Abrabanel too, in his youth, delivered discourses to the Lisbon Jewish community, that he briefly resumed this practice on his initial arrival in Spain, and that much of the material included within these discourses was later incorporated into his biblical commentaries. However, judging by the tone of his commentaries, his discourses were probably of a more academic, and less emotional, type than those of these other authorities. Abrabanel attracted a small, elite group of learned men around him, to whom he imparted his intellectual ideas, and to whom he refers<sup>944</sup> as '*Ha-haverim makshivim le'koli*' ('the colleagues who pay heed to my voice').<sup>945</sup> This was a far cry from public '*musar*' (spiritual and ethical guidance) directed at the common man. Any serious student of Abrabanel's commentaries will soon realise that, like Maimonides and Ibn Ezra, he is primarily an exegete for intellectuals. That is not to say that his words contained no uplifting messages, and certainly his later works, such as his messianic trilogy, presented as a commentary to the Book of Daniel, are imbued with a spirit of apocalyptic zeal. Nonetheless, they can, overall, be fairly described as lacking in mass popular appeal.

#### 1.6.8 Not being an Acknowledged Major Talmudic Authority

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<sup>944</sup> Abrabanel: Epilogue to Commentary to Judges, 161.

<sup>945</sup> A lyrical phrase borrowed from Canticles 8:13.

It has already been shown above, in that section of the dissertation dealing with the nature and content of medieval Jewish education, that within Ashkenazi communities, profound knowledge of the Talmud and its intricate dialectics, and of practical *halakhah*, was prized above knowledge of the Bible, Jewish philosophy, Hebrew language, grammar and poetry, and *a fortiori* above secular culture. Amongst Sephardim this tendency was not nearly so pronounced, but here too a crucial twofold change in the situation occurred during the century following Abrabanel's death. First, the influence of the Lurianic Kabbalah became all-pervasive, virtually drowning out the opposing currents of rationalism (with the possible exception of the Italian mainland). Secondly, the appearance of Karo's comprehensive and authoritative code of Jewish religious law, the 'Shulhan Arukh', naturally accentuated the emphasis on *halakhah* in the ordinary Jew's daily life in ever-increasing measure. The fact that Karo was not only an outstanding *halakhist* but also a major exponent of Kabbalah, further cemented the authority and captivating power of Judaism's mystical lore. Significantly in this connection, Gaster, in his Cambridge lecture, claimed that Abrabanel's exegesis became outmoded as falling between two stools – possessing neither the mystical strain of Judaism on the one hand nor its detailed Talmudic legalism on the other.<sup>946</sup>

Moreover, upon examining carefully those particular biblical exegetes enjoying the most popularity over the centuries, one finds that heading the list are the names of Rashi and Nahmanides, both of whom also composed extensive commentaries or *novellae* on the Talmud.

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<sup>946</sup> Gaster: 'Abravanel's Literary Work', in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 67.

### 1.6.9 Frequent Caustic Criticisms of his Predecessors' Views

Whilst Abrabanel does undeniably sometimes employ phrases such as ‘but *their* mode of exposition does not find favour in my eyes’ or ‘but what *I* have written is correct’ (in preference to the erroneous views of earlier authorities), I do not regard such expressions, *per se*, as constituting more than a minor irritant. Abrabanel is hardly alone in stressing the superiority of his interpretations over those of others, or even in the sharpness of the language used to express his dissent, though he is manifestly no respecter of persons.<sup>947</sup> Nahmanides expresses himself quite forcefully about Ibn Ezra, as does the latter himself about some of his predecessors. And, within the *halakhic* sphere, R. Abraham b. David is far more scathing about Maimonides.

It should be evident from the above analysis that the cumulative weight of all these factors has effectively deprived Abrabanel’s biblical commentaries of the attention, and popular affection, that their profundity and immense wealth of erudition truly merit. Nonetheless, judging from the contemporary anecdotal evidence cited above, he is currently enjoying a popular revival within the Sephardi world, and his general greatness and religious significance is, belatedly, being appreciated by the Ashkenazim too, though their admiration apparently does not extend to an *intensive study* of his biblical commentaries.

## 2. Among Christians

### 2.1 Sources

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<sup>947</sup> Abrabanel attacks Rashi in the Introduction to his Commentary to Joshua, Maimonides in his Commentary to 1Kings 8:11 & II Samuel 24, Ibn Ezra, for disrespectful mockery, in his Commentary to Exodus 20:2, and Radak for plagiarism, at the end of his Commentary to Amos.

For some of the factual information concerning individual scholars in this section, I am indebted to Netanyahu's classic biography of Abrabanel, and have, for convenience, adopted the citations contained in his copious footnotes. I have, moreover, obtained useful supplementary material from the published series of lectures on Abrabanel delivered in Cambridge in 1937 by Goodman and Rabinowitz. Much information on early modern and near-contemporary Christian scholars' exegetical citations from Abrabanel's biblical commentaries has been gleaned from the scholarly International Critical Commentary on the Bible. I have also had occasional recourse to the Jewish Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia Judaica and the New Catholic Encyclopedia for additional biographical material, citing, in footnotes, the authors of the various articles containing the relevant source-material in each case, fully referenced as appropriate. In several instances, however, (e.g. Bartolocci, Richard Simon), I have had access to the original printed versions of the commentators in question, this again being indicated in appropriate footnote citations.

## 2.2 Admiration, Criticism and Denunciation

Within the Christian world, no Jewish biblical commentator has been more widely read and analysed over the last 500 years than Abrabanel. Apparently no fewer than thirty Christian writers have closely studied his exegetical works, which they condensed and translated. Amongst the most famous of these is Hugo Grotius, 17th century Hebraist and founder of international law, who endorses Abrabanel's political and constitutional views, as expressed in his commentaries, as those of a distinguished authority.<sup>948</sup> Furthermore, Gaster, in his 1937 Cambridge lecture,<sup>949</sup> lists the following

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<sup>948</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 323 fn.204, citing Grotius: *De jure belli et pacis* Book I ch.I, sect.vi.

names of Christian scholars who commented (albeit largely adversely, in rebuttal of his attacks on Christian dogma) upon Abrabanel's exegesis, all of these being similarly cited by Netanyahu in his biography: Lakemacher, Alting, L'Empereur,<sup>950</sup> Hulsius<sup>951</sup> and J.G. Carpzov (the last-named focusing on Abrabanel's commentary to Daniel, strongly challenging his Judaic messianic interpretations).<sup>952</sup> Goodman, in his Cambridge lecture, further calls attention to the highly appreciative biography of Abrabanel composed in Latin by the German scholar Johann Heinrich Mai, and his translation of *Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah* (part of the commentary on Daniel) into Latin.<sup>953</sup> Rabinowitz, in his lecture, cites E. H. Lindo's 'Biographical notes to the Conciliador' (by Menasseh b. Israel) to the effect that the study of Abrabanel's commentary on Isaiah was prohibited to Christians by papal edict (presumably because its messianic ideology was so threatening to their faith).<sup>954</sup>

To this list may be added certain other important figures, such as Buddeus,<sup>955</sup> Johann Buxtorf the Younger, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament studies at Basel

<sup>949</sup> Gaster: 'Abravanel's Literary Work', 69.

<sup>950</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 324, fn.206, citing C. L'Empereur: Refutations of Abrabanel's commentaries on Isaiah 42:13 & 43 (Leyden, 1631); L'Empereur was appointed 'Controversarium Judaicarum Professor' at Leyden University in 1627, the function of this post being to defend Christianity against Jewish attacks and convert Jews to it.

<sup>951</sup> A.Hulsius: *Theologiae Judaicae* (Brede, 1653-4), I, 528 (containing refutations of some of Abrabanel's interpretations of Daniel). He cites Abrabanel copiously, noting that he generally follows Kimhi in his biblical interpretations, and appends Abrabanel's entire *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah*, in the Hebrew original, to his own work, together with a Latin translation. In one case, (460) he calls Abrabanel 'impudent', for querying what sin Adam's descendants had committed to merit eternal punishment in hell. Notably, Hulsius mentions Abrabanel alongside Ibn Ezra and R. Lipman (Heller) (17<sup>th</sup> cent.) as particularly vehement anti-Christian polemicists.

<sup>952</sup> R.H Fischer in: New Catholic Encyclopedia, ed. McGraw and Hill (Washington D.C., 1967) 145-46, citing J.G.Carpzov: *Introductio ad libros canonicos bibliorum VT* (1714-21), and *Critica Sacra* (1728). Carpzov was one of the foremost orthodox Christian Old Testament scholars of his day, and assailed the early biblical critics. He cites Abrabanel several times in his 'Introductio'.

<sup>953</sup> P. Goodman: 'Introductory Lecture' in: Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures, 13, citing J.H.Mai: 'Vita Don Isaaci Abrabanelis', printed at rear of '*Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah*' (Frankfurt-on-the-Main, 1711) 20-34.

<sup>954</sup> Rabinowitz: 'Abravanel as Exegete', 88.

<sup>955</sup> J.F. Buddeus: *Prolegom. in Historia Ecclesiastica Veteris Testamenti Part I* (Magdeburg, 1715) 120 (citing Abrabanel's controversial view of the role of the serpent in the Garden of Eden); Part II

University from 1630 until his death, who, though often disputing Abrabanel on theological grounds, nonetheless ardently admired him, translated many of his works into Latin, and composed a lengthy series of dissertations on his writings,<sup>956</sup> and Bartolocci. The last-named, a late 17th century Catholic ecclesiastic, with an excellent knowledge of, but distaste for, Judaism, nurtured an inveterate hatred of Abrabanel, both on a personal and literary plane. He claimed, in his work ‘Vitae celeberrimorum Rabbinorum’, that Abrabanel was of base character, a hypocritical opportunist, a plagiariser of others’ works and guilty of complicity in the Portuguese nobles’ plot to depose their sovereign, Joao II. In all probability he was mortally offended by Abrabanel’s attacks on the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. However, his bias against Abrabanel, both in this book and in his article on Abrabanel in his *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, is so blatant that his strictures on Abrabanel’s literary compositions may be safely dismissed as those of a manifestly hostile witness.<sup>957</sup> Bartolocci devotes fifteen full-length folio pages, in Vol. III of the latter work, to his hostile biographical sketch of Abrabanel, appending thereto a comprehensive list of all his literary compositions.<sup>958</sup>

It is particularly instructive to examine Bartolocci’s stance towards Abrabanel’s messianic work ‘Mashmi’a Yeshuah’, which admittedly represented a fundamental theological challenge to Christianity. An apposite direct citation in the original Latin, followed by my English translation, capturing the flavour of Bartolocci’s work as a whole, may be allowed to speak for itself:

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(Magdeburg, 1719) 597 (citing Abrabanel’s opinion on the date of the Prophet Joel).

<sup>956</sup> M.Kayserling in: Jewish Encyclopedia 3, ed.I.Singer (N.Y. & London 1901) 446, citing J.G. Buxtorf: *Dissertationes philologico-theologicae* (Basel, 1662).

<sup>957</sup> J. Bartolocci: *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, III, (Rome, 1683).

<sup>958</sup> Ibid. 874-888.

‘Hanc Isaac Abravanel inter recentiores Rabbinos doctissimus ab Hebraicis existimatus, affert & explicat in suo libro ‘Mashmi’ah Yeshuah’, qui licet insensissimus Christianorum hostis sit, & perquam frequenter acerbiori stylo utatur in nos & nostram Christianam fidem...’<sup>959</sup>

‘This Isaac Abravanel, considered by the Hebrews the most learned amongst the more recent rabbis, declares and explains in his book ‘Mashmi’ah Yeshu’ah’ that it is permissible to be a most unfeeling foe of the Christians, and frequently employs an acerbic style (of language) against us and our Christian faith’.

One of Protestantism’s founding fathers, John Calvin, no friend of the Jews, who sharply assailed Abrabanel for his messianic doctrines, was forced to concede that Abrabanel ‘exceeded others in acuteness’.<sup>960</sup> Indeed, the very fact that Abrabanel was attacked by other Christian scholars shows the importance they attached to his writings, and the seriousness with which they viewed his intellectual challenge to the fundamental doctrines of their faith.

However, in my opinion, the most interesting of all the Christian students of Abrabanel’s exegesis is Richard Simon, a 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit Oratorian, sometimes described as ‘the father of biblical criticism’. In his ‘Histoire critique du vieux testament’, cited below in an 18th century English translation, he writes, astutely, of Abrabanel:

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<sup>959</sup> Idem.II, 771.

<sup>960</sup> Netanyahu: Abravanel, 323, fn.205, citing Calvin: Commentaries on Daniel, 4-44, 45 (Eng. trans., 183-186).

'We may, in my opinion, reap more advantage in the translation of the Scripture from Don Isaac Abravanel than from any other Jew. He has writ in an elegant style, and easy to be understood, although he is too copious, and sometimes in his writing, he affects rhetoric more than a true translation of the Bible. He usually in his commentaries gives the exposition of some other Rabbis, which he sometimes examines, and speaks his opinion very freely; his method is nevertheless tedious, because he asks many questions which he afterwards resolves, as may be seen in his Commentaries upon the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges,... Samuel and Kings. We may nevertheless observe that he is often too nice upon the exposition of other Rabbis, and that in several places he is too subtle. We have also his commentaries upon all the Prophets, whereof a new edition has been printed in Holland. He has also writ a separate Treatise upon the Book of Daniel...'<sup>961</sup>

Simon, while placing Abrabanel at the head of the list of Jewish biblical exegetes, particularly praising his clarity and elegance of expression, is nonetheless critical of his verbosity, occasional over-subtlety of interpretation and excessive rhetoric, and considers his 'question-and-answer' methodological technique tedious. On balance, however, he shows great appreciation of Abrabanel's exegetical merits, which is remarkable from a Jesuit Oratorian. As a somewhat controversial figure himself within conventional Catholic circles, for his treatment of the Scriptures as secular writings, Simon would naturally have appreciated Abrabanel's relatively tolerant religious approach and sense of historical perspective. His assaults on Christianity's fundamental doctrines would, for Simon at any rate, have been counter-balanced by

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<sup>961</sup> Simon: *Histoire critique du vieux testament* : Eng. trans. (London, 1682) Book III, ch.VI, 34-35.

his surprising readiness not only to consider, but even acknowledge, the validity of Christian views on several aspects of biblical interpretation.

### 2.3 Reasons for Historical Christian Fascination with Abrabanel

Perhaps, then, we have here the clue to gaining an understanding of what made Abrabanel's commentaries hold such a fascination for Christian scholars. Although he strongly disputed their doctrines, even occasionally exposing them to intellectual ridicule – which impelled them to attempt refutation - he showed a willingness to grant the Christian scholars their due, perceiving that there was ultimately room for a non-sectarian type of biblical exegesis. Unlike virtually all the other Jewish commentators, he at least spoke in a language, and employed concepts to which Christians could relate. He shared with many of them the common humanist ideals and rhetoric, as well as a flavour of the critical spirit of enquiry slowly beginning to emerge amongst the Christian intelligentsia of Western and Central Europe.

Abrabanel is further cited quite frequently in the early 20th century International Critical Commentary on all the various Books of the Bible, a highly respected work of Christian scholarship, which attempts to combine Christian tradition with the results of modern biblical criticism.<sup>962</sup> Abrabanel is mentioned in the Index to several of its various volumes as being one of the authorities consulted by several of the contributors to this encyclopaedic work.

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<sup>962</sup> International Critical Commentary, ed. S.R. Driver, A. Plummer & C.A. Briggs. Contributors consulting Abrabanel during their researches are:- G.F. Moore (on Judges) (Edinburgh, 1966) xlviii, adding that Abrabanel is largely dependent on Gersonides; H.P. Smith (on Samuel) (Edinburgh, 1969) xxxvii; W.R. Harper (on Amos & Hosea) (Edinburgh, 1973) xviii; H.G. Mitchell, J.M.P. Smith, J.A. Bewer (on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Jonah) (Edinburgh, 1971) xiii; J.M.P. Smith, W.H. Ward, J.A. Bewer (on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Joel) (Edinburgh, 1974) viii; J.A. Montgomery (on Daniel) (Edinburgh, 1972) xv&106, noting that Abrabanel, uniquely amongst Jewish commentators, reckons Daniel amongst the Prophets, therein adopting the Christian view.

## 2.4 Reasons for Current Christian Indifference

I am unaware of any ongoing fascination with Abrabanel amongst contemporary Christian scholars. This, I believe, is largely due to their general ignorance of rabbinic or medieval Hebrew and the fact that Abrabanel's biblical commentaries have still not been comprehensively translated into any modern European language, thus remaining largely inaccessible. In light of these considerations, religious and academic Jewish scholars might arguably consider restoring Abrabanel to his rightful place as one of Judaism's leading thinkers and foremost biblical exegetes.

## 3. General Conclusions

3.1 Within Judaism, Abrabanel's place as a leading biblical commentator is assured. His methodology, especially the elaborate 'question-and-answer' technique he developed, will retain a perennial appeal for those fond of precise logical structure. As regards the substance of his commentaries, he must be reckoned amongst the foremost exponents of '*P'shat*'-type biblical exegesis. In particular, his feel for and emphasis on the historical contexts of the passages on which he was commenting, rare for his time, should endear him to modern scholars of the '*Wissenschaft*' school. His originality of thought and creativity also give him a definite edge over the more conventional commentators. Moreover, his frequent digressions, invariably interesting and covering an unusually broad range of topics, from ancient Greek philosophy, astronomy, geography, classical and European history, Christian theology and political thought to anecdotes and folklore, reflect his towering intellect, and should endear him even to those of a more secular bent. However, these qualities alone would not, I believe, have sufficed to render him acceptable even to the ultra-

orthodox. Together with his primary emphasis on ‘*P’shat*’, he displays, throughout his commentaries, an excellent knowledge of Midrash and an uncanny ability to interweave it into the complex fabric of his multi-faceted tapestry. Abrabanel evinces a sophisticated understanding of Midrash, appreciating its perennial didactic and moral value. He is, however, no slave to it, and is prepared to criticise or reject it should he consider its teachings too far removed from the biblical text itself, which always remains his starting-point.

I would suggest, therefore, that it is Abrabanel’s rare combination of precise methodological structure, conventional ‘*P’shat*’, sophisticated blend of *midrashic* exposition and thought-provoking interpretive novelties, that have earned him the adulation of the various later exegetes cited above.

There will, nonetheless, always be room for criticism, or neglect of, his exegesis, particularly amongst those of a more straight-laced mindset. Besides his unfortunate stylistic prolixity, for which he has been heavily berated over the centuries, and which has effectively impeded a full translation of his biblical commentaries into any modern European language to date, there are undeniable instances of his deliberate rejection of hallowed tradition in favour of more ‘modernistic’ and critical views on substantive issues, as observed by the numerous authorities aforementioned. These two factors, above all, will in my view continue to militate against Abrabanel being placed, within strictly orthodox circles at any rate, on a par with Rashi and Nahmanides.

3.2 Within Christianity, as we have seen, Abrabanel attained particular popularity in the past because, although he vehemently opposed its doctrines, he spoke in a theological and philosophical language to which Christians could relate. He had clearly imbibed their literature and was ready to refer to it, fairly respectfully, in his own works. He wrote in the idiom of both the medieval scholastics and contemporary Christian humanist thinkers, demonstrating a readiness not only to consider the views of their theologians, but even, occasionally, to embrace them, on non-doctrinal issues. This was unprecedented in the previous history of Jewish biblical exegesis.

Moreover, needless to say, Christians, far from being disturbed by Abrabanel's breaches with Talmudic or *aggadic* tradition, probably welcomed them as marking at least a partial liberation from what they regarded as the shackles of the Talmud.

Essentially, however, the Christian scholars' enduring interest in Abrabanel arose out of their need to refute his powerful and sustained attacks upon the fundamentals of their faith. They appreciated the force of his polemical arguments – we have seen how Calvin acknowledged Abrabanel's exceptional acuteness – and felt a religious obligation to engage with him theologically with a view to rebutting them.

Whilst Abrabanel is studied, and cited, by learned Jews today, contemporary Christians have apparently consigned his exegesis to history. As suggested above, this is partly due to their unfamiliarity with Rabbinic Hebrew. Moreover, the primary challenges to contemporary Christianity no longer emanate from Judaism, as they did in medieval and early modern times, and thus, on this battlefield, Judaism has simply become an irrelevance, as the enemy of yesteryear.

## Chapter Nine

### Overall Conclusions

#### 1. General

In the course of this dissertation, a wide variety of themes relating to Abrabanel's biblical exegesis have been explored. Besides the detailed analysis of the structure, methodology and substantive content of his exegesis, to which a specialised focus upon Abrabanel's commentary to I Samuel 1 has been appended as a representative sample, various specific themes, arising out of the commentaries, have been selected for in-depth review, in separate chapters, i.e. his views on various forms of constitutional government, his stance towards Christianity and the Karaites, his attitudes towards issues of Race and Ethnicity, and finally, a survey of the Reception History of his exegetical writings over the past five centuries.

Within this overall framework, several particular topics have been highlighted, as being deemed worthy of special consideration. These include Abrabanel's psychological insights into Scripture, his perceived dual role as 'Digestor' of the views of his exegetical predecessors and as creative thinker, the apparent dichotomy between his 'conservative' and 'liberal' tendencies, the nature and purpose of his frequent digressions from strict interpretation of the biblical text, and his literary style.

#### 2. Common Threads

In my Introduction, I posed various fundamental questions in relation to Abrabanel's exegesis which I undertook to explore and resolve through my research. Before presenting my resolutions to these questions, however, I consider it necessary, first, to

demonstrate the common threads running through and inter-connecting all these ostensibly diverse topics, to which separate chapters have been devoted, which have not been selected merely at random. The common factor is indeed the Renaissance itself, because it is only during that particular era in European history that many of these themes came to assume a high level of prominence amongst the intelligentsia, i.e. the Christian clergy, university scholars and learned aristocracy. The efflorescence of culture during that period was at its zenith since classical antiquity, and the discovery of the New World and global exploration in general had vastly broadened man's intellectual horizons.<sup>963</sup> By virtue of his aristocratic lineage, his family connections and broad-based education, Abrabanel was exceptionally well-equipped to take advantage of this fresh atmosphere, moving, as he did, in the most distinguished circles and enjoying a relatively lengthy lifespan, during which he endured many vicissitudes of fortune.

His innate intellectual gifts and exceptional versatility admirably suited the temper of the age. As most of his biblical commentaries (generally acknowledged as the most important and enduring of all his literary works) were composed, or at least put into their final form during the last years of his life, he was able to reflect and convey, within their pages, a vast store of knowledge, insight and experience.

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<sup>963</sup> See Chapter 1. A dissenting view is expressed by J.H. Elliott, who speaks of 'the apparent slowness of Europe in making the mental adjustments required to incorporate America within its field of vision'. He observes that 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish authors were strangely reticent about the New World and that in England too, there was little sign of literary interest before the 1550s. However, Elliott himself cites a significant number of cases contradicting his thesis, e.g. Peter Martyr, Guicciardini, Juan Luis Vives, the philosopher Lazzaro Buonanico, Louis le Roy and Gomara, all of whom displayed excitement at the discovery of the New World. See J.H. Elliott: *The Old World and the New 1492-1650* (Cambridge, 1970) 6-10, 12. Insofar as Abrabanel himself is concerned, it is clear, from the various above citations gleaned from his biblical commentaries, that he was personally interested in the Portuguese exploration of Africa rather than in the New World, which supports Elliott's view.

We have seen that Renaissance thinkers had developed notions of political theory.<sup>964</sup> Abrabanel's focus, in his biblical commentaries, upon the relative merits of various different types of political constitution, an issue which had received scant attention from other Jewish commentators, makes sense only in the context of this environment.

As regards Abrabanel's extraordinary focus, from a traditional Jewish exegete's perspective, upon Christianity, this again is easily explicable within the context of his particular era, and in light of his personal experiences.<sup>965</sup> Whilst earlier generations of Jewish commentators had been fully aware of Christian doctrine and of the dangers posed by militant Christianity to traditional Jewish identity and belief, their encounter with it was largely on a theoretical plane. Abrabanel, besides being a great scholar, was, virtually throughout his life, a prominent communal leader, who, by virtue of his elevated position and social status, inevitably found himself exposed to encounters with high-ranking Christian nobility and clergy, and their religion, in all its manifestations. He not only had regular access to 'the Catholic Sovereigns', whom he served as State Treasurer for several years, and their court, but he had also directly witnessed the impact of the Inquisition and the enormous numbers of forced conversions of his co-religionists to the dominant faith. Rarely before in history had Judaism been so threatened by Christianity as it was in Iberia during the closing decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Abrabanel had also witnessed at first-hand the Expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492, a calamity which, notwithstanding all his efforts as an influential statesman, he had proved powerless to avert. All this weighed heavily upon his mind, and he accordingly found it necessary to extol the virtues of *Jewish*

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<sup>964</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>965</sup> See Chapters 1 and 5.

messianism, in the hope of being able to stem the almost unstoppable flow of conversions to the faith of the Christian messiah, which now appeared triumphant.

But Abrabanel knew that Christianity could not be simply dismissed on the intellectual plane. He was aware of the significant contribution some Christian theologians had made towards the understanding of Scripture, and of their admirable level of faith in God, which contrasted strongly with what he perceived as the shallowness and insincerity of many of the Jewish philosophers. Hence he adopted a relatively objective approach towards the ideas of Christians, on non-doctrinal issues, some of which he felt able to accommodate. Such broad-minded thinking was again characteristic of the intellectual currents of the Renaissance.

Abrabanel's sharp attacks on the Karaites, the leading heretical Jewish sect, analysed in Chapter 6, are admittedly somewhat more difficult to explain, since Karaism, as a live movement, had been extirpated from Iberia centuries earlier, thus constituting no imminent spiritual danger. Two special factors are, however, relevant here. First, as someone with a global world-view, developed as a result of the Renaissance, Abrabanel knew that there still remained significant pockets of Karaites in Eastern Europe and the Levant. Second, in his self-perception as fundamentally an exponent of Scripture's contextual meaning, he needed to erect clearly-defined barriers between himself and these extreme literalists, so that no possible confusion could arise between his acceptable '*P'shat*' traditionalism and their heresies. Combating their arguments was for him both an intellectual and spiritual exercise. (The parallel phenomenon within contemporary Christianity was those humanist scholars such as

Erasmus who used their intellectual talents in defence of Catholicism against pervasive heresy.)

We have seen in Chapter 7, dealing with Abrabanel's views on Race and Ethnicity, the extent to which his non-Jewish contemporaries, partly as a result of their recent and novel experiences of global travel and exploration, had formed definite notions about the alien races with whom they were now coming into regular contact. The upper echelons of Portuguese society frequently owned black slaves. It is my contention that such views as Abrabanel expressed on this issue, which I have discussed in the relevant chapter, could not have been formulated within the predominantly monolithic society of early and high medieval Europe, but only in Renaissance times, when this had become a live issue.

Thus Abrabanel's multiple interests, in politics, history, geography, travel, linguistics and other disciplines, are all hallmarks of the typical Renaissance-man, and such a rounded personality as he could not have flourished in any other era. He constitutes an excellent example of the 'matrix' of disciplines of which Debora Shuger speaks in her eloquent description of Renaissance intellectualism. It is accordingly the Renaissance that provides the common, binding thread running inexorably through all the individual themes selected by me for analysis.

In Chapter 8, dealing with the Reception History of Abrabanel's Exegesis, I have shown why his biblical commentaries achieved such immense popularity amongst later generations of Christian scholars. His broad-mindedness, willingness to engage with, and even learn from, Christianity, coupled with his clarity of expression and

'scientific' methodology, all contributed towards this – and these are all hallmarks of Renaissance humanism. What is, however, somewhat more surprising is that his exegetical works should simultaneously have become so acceptable within traditional Jewish circles. This phenomenon is explicable only on the basis that Abrabanel, for all his bold innovations, creativity and independent thought, ultimately succeeded in retaining, and competently transmitting, unadulterated, the hard core of Jewish theology, tradition and practice. In this, again, he is the Jewish equivalent of the deeply religious Christian humanists of the period. His combination and reconciliation of these two distinct elements constitute the secret of his success.

3. It now remains for me to provide resolutions of the research questions posed in my Introduction, and in the various thematic chapters, in light of the evidence gleaned by me on each of my various selected topics.

#### 4. Analysis of Abrabanel's Biblical Exegesis

4.1 The first question is to determine the extent to which Abrabanel's biblical exegesis conforms to the traditional medieval type, the degree to which it is inspired by the Renaissance humanist spirit, and finally, the degree to which it stands alone, in splendid isolation.

The evidence I have gleaned, and presented in Chapter 2, dealing with the main features of Abrabanel's exegesis, suggests that he is very much an eclectic commentator, and a thinker of contrasts. On the one hand, he uncompromisingly reveres and adheres to the 'conservative wing' of medieval Jewish theology, as we have seen in his stance towards Creation, Miracles and Revelation. He rejects

Maimonides' radical notions about the nature of prophecy, and his allegorisation of miracles, and Gersonides' view of the eternity of the universe. He is extremely conservative, too, on the Divine/Mosaic origin of the entire Pentateuch, declining to follow the lead of Ibn Ezra (with whom he has much in common in several other respects) in assigning certain verses to later authors.<sup>966</sup> Yet in numerous other aspects of his exegesis, Abrabanel displays liberal tendencies and flexible modes of thought. Building upon the edifice of earlier scholarship, my own researches have uncovered the existence of such tendencies particularly in the following areas:

4.1.1 In his appreciation of the historical background of the prophetic literature, both in its narrative and poetic sections. He has a modernistic appreciation of the biblical *dramatis personae* as real-life characters, rather than mere idealised philosophical abstracts. For Abrabanel, the biblical heroes are not faultless, but as the plain scriptural narratives depict them, stripped of the *midrashic* embellishments which tend to obscure their shortcomings. The supreme example of this is David,<sup>967</sup> but this tendency is also manifest in Abrabanel's treatment of the narratives of Joseph and his brothers,<sup>968</sup> and of Amnon and Tamar.<sup>969</sup> In this general sphere, Abrabanel evinces far more historical insight than Maimonides and the 'liberal' philosophers.

4.1.2 In his predilection for biblical chronology, another area of importance to him because of his historical sensitivities.<sup>970</sup> His critique of the traditional rabbinic chronology of Seder Olam, in his commentary to I Samuel 13:1, is far-reaching and

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<sup>966</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>967</sup> Ibid.

<sup>968</sup> Ibid.

<sup>969</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>970</sup> See Chapter 2.

unprecedented for its time. Indeed, it is only his respect for the biblical text itself that prevented him from adopting the even more radical stance of the later Azariah dei Rossi, who was prepared to jettison even the historicity of the Bible in favour of the conflicting views of Gentile historians.

4.1.3 On the linguistic side, we have shown how Abrabanel's sensitivity to the different shades of meaning of Hebrew words and verbal nuances frequently led him to advance novel interpretations of the biblical text, both on the Prophets and the Pentateuch, which have no parallel anywhere else.<sup>971</sup> These '*sui generis*' interpretations, which are very abundant, and of which several examples have been adduced and discussed, reflect Abrabanel's particular mindset as a lateral thinker. The question as to whether they may legitimately be considered as within the category of '*P'shat*' has proved most difficult to determine. They are certainly neither homiletical, allegorical nor mystical, nor are they, save extremely rarely, of the 'allusional' (*Gemetric*) type found in the 'Ba'al ha-Turim'. They are based on the very words of Scripture themselves, and not dependent upon any external data. Yet they do not constitute the plain meaning of the text as understood by the consensus of earlier commentators. Whilst it is possible to read them into the words of the biblical text, and they fit the text grammatically and syntactically, they are not interpretations that would occur naturally to the ordinary reader. Hence we are left with the choice as to whether to place them in the sole residual category officially recognised by the rabbinic mind, '*P'shat*', or whether to relegate them to a class of their own. I have demonstrated above that by medieval times, certainly from Ibn Ezra and Rashbam onward, the word '*P'shat*' was synonymous with the plain, contextual meaning. We

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<sup>971</sup> Ibid.

have also seen how Rabbi Kamenetsky referred to Abrabanel, alongside Ibn Ezra, as interpreters of Scripture ‘*ke-mashma’uto*.<sup>972</sup> The similarity Kamenetsky finds between these two exegetes is revealing, insofar as both are frequently willing to interpret biblical texts independently of their traditional interpretation, as encapsulated in the Talmuds and the *halakhic* Midrashim. We have further seen that the expression ‘*p’shuto ke-mashma’o*’, used by Rashi and others (which has entered Modern Hebrew phraseology) indicates that ‘*P’shat*’ and ‘*mashma’ut*’ are synonymous, denoting ‘contextual meaning’.

Abrabanel would certainly have regarded his *sui generis* creative interpretations as squarely within the realms of ‘*P’shat*’. He frequently refers to himself as an expositor of ‘*P’shat*’, and certainly many of his interpretations *are* straightforward. Thus I would conclude that one of Abrabanel’s major contributions to scriptural exegesis was to extend the concept of ‘*P’shat*’ in a substantially more elastic direction, so as to render it capable of accommodating novel interpretations of an unusual, idiosyncratic type - ‘*P’shat*’ with a twist! This flexibility indeed found few followers, thus justifying Rabinowitz’s observation that Abrabanel ‘stands alone, in splendid isolation’.

4.1.4 In his sophisticated psychological insights into Scripture, of which various instances have been adduced.<sup>973</sup> Here again, Abrabanel was on fresh ground, initiating an interpretational mode which was to be adopted in the modern era, though scarcely among the traditional commentators.

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<sup>972</sup> Ibid.

<sup>973</sup> See Chapters 2 & 3.

4.1.5 It would be fair to conclude from all the available evidence that Abrabanel was as revolutionary in the field of textual criticism of the Bible and appreciation of its historical background as was Maimonides in that of philosophy and theology, though, for doctrinal reasons, his intense radicalism was largely confined to the exegesis of the Prophets and Hagiographa rather than the Pentateuch.

4.2 Regarding the structural and methodological aspects of his exegesis, I enquired as to the origin of his ‘question-and-answer’ technique<sup>974</sup> and of the idea of his providing formal Introductions to the biblical books.<sup>975</sup> My researches revealed that, *pace Ruiz*, the concept of Introductions was not adopted wholesale from the Christian scholastics, as traditional Jewish commentators such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides, who had little contact with them, had likewise employed this device. I conclude that this was a case of convergent development within Judaism and Christianity. As regards the ‘question-and-answer’ technique, Saperstein’s thesis that it was influenced only to a limited extent by the scholastic ‘Method of Doubts’ is feasible.<sup>976</sup> Nonetheless, Gaon’s view that Abrabanel borrowed it, in particular, from Tostado, a scholastic/humanist, cannot be lightly dismissed.<sup>977</sup> However, when comparing the fragmentary nature of the technique appearing in Abrabanel’s contemporaries Isaac Karo and Isaac Arama, one sees the extent to which Abrabanel had developed its scope far beyond either, due to the fact that his questions reflect the issues discussed in his numerous previous lectures, and, as he himself informs us, he

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<sup>974</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>975</sup> Ibid.

<sup>976</sup> Ibid.

<sup>977</sup> Ibid.

deliberately employed the technique as a didactic device, to stimulate students' interest in Scripture.<sup>978</sup>

4.3 Finally, on the further question whether Abrabanel's frequent digressions are justifiable in the context of an official biblical commentary, my conclusion is that they are, given his Renaissance humanist background. In common with other, Christian exegetes of the period, he felt that Scripture had perennial relevance, and accordingly that contemporary events could shed light upon it.<sup>979</sup>

## 5. Specialised Survey of Abrabanel's Commentary to I Samuel 1

In Chapter 3, I endeavoured, by use of specific examples, to highlight Abrabanel's linguistic sensitivities, his extraordinary psychological insights into human character, his primary emphasis on the contextual meaning of the biblical text, and sophisticated and critical use of *midrashic* sources. I selected this particular chapter for analysis because of its potential for exegetical ingenuity, fully exploited by Abrabanel. I conclude that his overall approach is novel and radical, though this particular chapter does not contain any of the extreme revolutionary, anti-traditional ideas appearing elsewhere in his biblical exegesis.

## 6. Religion and Politics

In Chapter 4, I enquired into the source or sources of Abrabanel's negative view of Monarchy, postulating three feasible options – the influence of Scripture, the conclusions drawn from his personal experiences both as statesman and Jewish

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<sup>978</sup> Ibid.

<sup>979</sup> Ibid.

communal leader, and the influence of medieval/Renaissance political theory. I conclude, upon analysis of all the available evidence, that Abrabanel was primarily influenced by his personal understanding of Scripture on this issue, which was fundamentally at variance with the traditional rabbinic stance. I attempted to demonstrate that Abrabanel's views were formed not only as a result of his interpretation of the relevant passage in Deuteronomy, but equally importantly, by the later history of Israelite monarchy as reflected throughout the prophetic literature.

Moreover, he was confirmed in the correctness of his view by his own traumatic experiences, and by the calamity befalling his co-religionists under the Iberian absolutist monarchical regimes, which served to verify the scriptural message. This conclusion contradicts Netanyahu's view.

I have also shown that his maverick view that, notwithstanding the undesirability of monarchy as an institution, rebellion against even a tyrannical ruler was prohibited derived directly from the Bible, not from rabbinic sources, which were silent on the issue, or from contemporary political theory, which nowhere contained any such dichotomy.

Additionally, I highlighted further nuances in Abrabanel's position, i.e. that his disdain for monarchy extended to constitutional as well as absolute monarchies, and that he was more uncompromisingly opposed to Jewish than to Gentile monarchies.

I further concluded that his relative enthusiasm for republican forms of government was based not on humanist literary sources, but on his personal experience of the

Venetian model, which was the envy of Europe, and which he believed conformed to the ideal form of government introduced by Moses for the Israelites upon Jethro's advice, in Exodus. (His interpretation of the relevant passage is characteristically novel and idiosyncratic.)

These conclusions are partially supportive of Netanyahu's thesis, but I believe I have proved his proposition that the chief basis for Abrabanel's anti-monarchism was scriptural far more convincingly than he has. I have shown that the examples adduced by Netanyahu do not really prove his case, but that other biblical sources, omitted by him, *are* conclusive. I have also demonstrated that Abrabanel's anti-rebellion stance was similarly scripturally-based and further, that his views were scarcely influenced, if at all, by European political theorists. Finally, I have shown, by reference to the rabbinic sources, that Kimelman's thesis that Republicanism itself was an integral part of Jewish tradition and that Abrabanel was thus not revolutionary in embracing it is groundless. Specifically, I have observed that Alshich's vehement denunciation of Abrabanel's anti-monarchical view shows how totally alien Republicanism was to rabbinic tradition. I have further shown that Baer's thesis that Abrabanel's anti-monarchism was ultimately derived from humanist sources, which were mainly republican in sentiment, is mistaken. Moreover, I consider Strauss's invocation of 'medieval Christian' and 'humanist' sources for Abrabanel's anti-monarchism incorrect, or at least unproven, as many humanists were pro-monarchical, and Abrabanel never cites the anti-monarchical ones in support of his position.

## 7. Abrabanel's Stance towards Christianity

In Chapter 5, I posed two fundamental questions; first, why Abrabanel, as a traditional Jewish exegete, was so concerned with Christianity, and second, why he is so vehemently opposed to Christianity in some instances, yet receptive towards its ideas in others. In this field, too, I have highlighted Abrabanel's uniquely eclectic and radical approach. I have demonstrated that Abrabanel differed from all his exegetical predecessors in his approach to Christianity

- By citing Christian authors by name, and frequently with deference.
- By his detailed, and relatively objective, analysis of their views on non-doctrinal issues, an excellent illustration of this being his elaborate and relatively sympathetic treatment of the ideas of the apostate Bishop Paul of Burgos on Jewish monarchy.)
- By his extensive refutation of numerous aspects of Christian theology.

I have suggested that his eclecticism is due to two competing objectives; on the one hand, his innate *intellectualism*, motivating him to seek the truth from whatever source it emanates (and, as a subsidiary consideration, where Christian theologians expressed greater faith in God than the Jewish philosophers, their ideas were to be preferred); and on the other, his *ardent desire, as an acknowledged Jewish communal leader, to contain apostasy*, which, in the prevailing circumstances, constituted a major threat to the survival of Judaism. From the citations I have selected, it should be apparent that Abrabanel's acquaintance with all aspects of Christian theology and history was profound - indeed unparalleled by any other earlier Jewish commentator - and I have explained that this was due to the environment in which he was reared, his broad-based humanist education and social contacts.

## 8. Abrabanel and the Karaites

8.1 In Chapter 6, I initially posed the question why Abrabanel chose to engage with their ideology altogether, given that Karaism, as a movement, had been extirpated from Iberia centuries earlier. My conclusion on this issue, which provides an insight into the type of exegete Abrabanel really was, is that he had a dual purpose. His first objective was purely intellectual – on the theoretical plane, he felt the necessity of getting to grips with ‘literalism’ with all its ramifications. Aware that biblical literalism, because of its respect for grammar, syntax and context, was a powerful interpretational tool, and being naturally attracted to a moderate form of it himself, he was sensitive to the need to distance his own approach from that of Karaism, with which it ostensibly had affinities. In this, he and Ibn Ezra found common ground. Abrabanel’s intellectual approach manifests itself in his argumentation, based primarily upon reason rather than upon a mere appeal to tradition, and his readiness to utilise untraditional arguments in support of tradition.

Abrabanel’s second objective was religious. He knew, from his general awareness of contemporary Jewish life, that the Karaites still represented a formidable threat to mainstream rabbinic Judaism in Eastern Europe and the Levant, and thus regarded it as a sacred obligation to combat it and uncover its inherent weaknesses and implausibility.

8.2 I posed a subsidiary question, essential for a proper assessment of Abrabanel’s value as a scholarly exegete, as to whether he represents the Karaite position accurately, and concluded, from copious comparative citations of excerpts from

Abrabanel's commentaries and Karaite texts, that he does so in virtually all instances. He is no crude polemicist, but an intellectual who takes his opponents' arguments seriously and engages with them on a point-by-point basis. I have demonstrated that this approach is unique among traditional Jewish exegetes. Finally, I have also shown how Abrabanel is willing, on occasion, to endorse the Karaite stance in regard to the interpretation of specific words and phrases where no doctrinal issues are at stake, and also, daringly, to present ideas akin, in effect, to those of Karaism (in the case of '*talio*') but without having been influenced by them.

8.3 I have, moreover, shown commonalities between Abrabanel's stance towards Karaism and Christianity. Identical motivations and objectives govern both – the abhorrence of heresy and apostasy, the urgent need to preserve traditional Judaism unadulterated at a time of exceptional upheavals. In both cases, however, Abrabanel exhibits his characteristic eclecticism, both in his readiness to borrow what he deems the best ideas from each and adapt them to his own purposes, for the enrichment of Jewish biblical exegesis.

## 9. Race and Ethnicity in Abrabanel's Biblical Exegesis

In Chapter 7, I posed the fundamental question as to Abrabanel's real views on this issue, as may be gleaned from all his references to the subject interspersed throughout his commentaries. My novel approach here was to excerpt and analyse every passage where he discusses this theme, in light of his own background, education and position in society, of his personal experiences with Blacks and understanding of the relevant biblical texts informing his thinking. My study was also conducted in light of the

views of various contemporary scholars, notably Goldenberg, Schorsch and Brion Davis.

After a careful review of all Abrabanel's relevant observations, with the views of contemporary scholarship in mind, I have concluded that Abrabanel's overall stance towards Blacks was ultimately based on Scripture. He held no innate bias against them, but would follow wherever he felt the Bible led him. In common with most Jewish and Christian exegetes, he felt constrained to accept the validity of Noah's curse on his son Ham, which meant that his descendants would be physically repulsive and permanent slaves. On the other hand, such repulsiveness did not imply moral turpitude on their part; and I showed, by reference to citations from Abrabanel's comments on passages in II Samuel, Jeremiah and Amos, that he was personally sympathetic towards Blacks. Admittedly, he owned a black slave-girl himself, but this was normal within Portuguese aristocratic circles, and he expressly praised her looks and domestic efficiency in correspondence. I further noted Abrabanel's repudiation of the view, expressed by Ibn Kaspi and other literalists, that Miriam's and Aaron's criticism of Moses in Numbers 12 was on account of his having actually married a black woman. His use of the text in Amos 9 is to challenge Ibn Ezra's negative view of Blacks, and to stress their strong family ties.

I further concluded that Brion Davis's extreme view that Abrabanel played a pivotal role in providing the conceptual basis for black slavery is utterly baseless. Further, Schorsch's general conclusions, albeit more moderate, are too confused and self-contradictory to be of much value. In particular, he confuses the issue of slavery with the stance towards Blacks as such, and fails to note that Abrabanel went out of his

way on several occasions to defend and praise their conduct, as I have pointed out. Finally, Goldenberg has erroneously over-emphasised the purely rabbinic ‘sex-in-the-ark’ theme at the expense of the explicit biblical curse on Ham as the major source for Abrabanel’s views on Blacks.

## 10. The Reception History of Abrabanel’s Biblical Exegesis

10.1 In Chapter 8, commencing with the empirical fact (asserted by Rabinowitz and confirmed by my own researches) that Abrabanel’s biblical commentaries have not enjoyed the degree of popularity within traditional Jewish circles (both Sephardi and Ashkenazi) achieved by other exegetes, e.g. Rashi and Nahmanides. I queried why this was so, and suggested numerous reasons, subjecting each to detailed analysis, including anecdotal evidence within my research. I highlighted the views of various subsequent exegetes who were favourably inclined, and their own stated reasons for this. I additionally cited criticisms of several aspects of Abrabanel’s commentaries by later exegetes, including those generally favourably inclined, and, again, attempted to explain what lay behind their criticism. I concluded that Abrabanel has suffered for the following overriding reasons (*inter alia*): he was renowned neither as an outstanding Talmudist nor as a Kabbalist (which represented the most popular trends within early modern Judaism), his occasional radical departures from tradition, and his stylistic prolixity, which tried the average reader’s patience. However, notwithstanding all this, and the serious reservations of many influential commentators, Abrabanel’s place as a major traditional Jewish exegete is assured. Malbim, in particular, was responsible for a revival in Abrabanel’s popularity. However, I felt constrained to add the qualification that, because of the

aforementioned factors, he will never achieve the status perennially enjoyed by Rashi, Nahmanides and ‘Or ha-Hayyim’.

10.2 I considered the further question why Abrabanel’s exegesis had attracted such interest in scholarly Christian circles, both favourable and hostile. I accepted Lawee’s view that this was due to the fact that Abrabanel, unlike other Jewish commentators, spoke in theological terms that Christians could at least understand and relate to. I bolstered this view by highlighting Calvin’s admission of Abrabanel’s exceptional ‘acuteness’, and more significantly, the accolades of praise showered upon him by the Jesuit Richard Simon, a precursor of modern biblical criticism. I also suggested that learned Christians were, variously, gratified at Abrabanel’s predilection for contextual exposition (de-emphasising the *midrashic* elements with which they had little sympathy), flattered at the deference he paid to the Doctors of the Church, and alarmed by his radical challenge to the fundamentals of their faith. For all these reasons, Christians found it vital to engage seriously with him.

10.3 Abrabanel’s eclecticism, broad general knowledge, open-mindedness to the acceptance of novel ideas, mental flexibility and creativity were all features of Renaissance humanism, but, as I have emphasised, in common with his Christian counterparts, they were not incompatible with staunch adherence to his ancestral faith.

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# APPENDIX

Hebrew Texts of Excerpted Citations from Abrabanel's Biblical  
Commentaries, numbered **(1)** – **(28)** consecutively.

**(I)** Abrabanel:  
Introduction to  
Comm. to Joshua,  
(Tel Aviv, 1960)  
13.

... והנה בחרותי בורך הוה להלדים  
השאלות לפי הפסוקים, להיות בעיני דבר מועיל לעורר  
העניות, ולהמציא היכוח ולחרחיב חקירה, וגם  
שחתעו רורת השאלות יביא פעמים רבות להוספה העיון  
בפסוקים ולהמציא בהם עניינים מתוקים מרבש וגופת  
זופים, ופעמים אסתטייע בפירושים מעט מדברי המפרשים  
ומדברי המדרשות, ופעמים אלה מותם ושהטאל ואימונת  
ואם הימין ואשטיילה, וזהו זה לפי שאת הופך נקל  
מהם ואת הרע לא נקל, והנה גנתתי דבריהם מזוקוק  
המלות שכבר באו בדברי המפרשים לכתירות הקיזור  
יעוינו משם, ובאיו מהפדרות ומאממי-חויל גיוויר  
סאות אגלי, ואזכור מקומות ובריות מה שלא עשה רוויין  
דיל, ולא אמנע מהראות החולשת שבאה בדבריהם  
במקומות שהיו דבריהם על דורך הפידוש ולא היו  
מקובלים אצלם, וכל זה בלשון פטואר, ולא בא לנסתך  
בחידות כראב"ע והרמב"ן דיל. והנה לא נתעסקתי להוציא  
תועלות מהספרים כדורן הרבביים

Translation on pp.107 - 108 of dissertation.

... והיותר נראה בוה הוא שהיה ממушת  
 עובדי שבדת גלולים בזמן קבוציהם לעשות כן  
 רוצה לטר לבשל הגודים בחלב בזמן אסיטה  
 התבאות לחשבם שבזה יתרצו לאלהיהם  
 ויתקרבו אליו וישלח ברכה במעשה דיווח  
 וכמ"ש (ויקרא ט"ז) ולא ינבחו עוד את נביחתם  
 לשעריות וכייש שהיו רגילים בוה אנשים דועץ  
 צאן בזמן שיתקמצו לעשות הנחוגותיהם ונימוסיהם  
 שהיה מאכלם או גידים מכושלים בחלב וכל  
 פיני תבשיל בשר וחלב. עוד היום הזה זה  
 דרךם במלכיות ספדר שיתקמצו כל הרועים  
 ב' פזמים בשנה להתייעץ ולעשויות תקנות בענייני  
 הרועים והצאן וקוראים לקבוץ ההוא בלשונם  
 מישט"ה ובזמן ההוא הנה זאת חקרנותן כן  
 היא שוה מאכלם בשר וחלב ובשר הגדיין  
 הם היותר נבחרים אצלם בתבשיל הזה וכבר  
 שאלתי ודרשתי וידעת באמת כי גם בא  
 קצה הארץ הנקרים אינגן אלאטירה שם כמות  
 מופלג מהצאן יותר מכל שאר הארצות זה  
 ג"כ מנהגם תמיד

Translation on pp.115 - 116 of dissertation.

(3) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Exodus,  
(Jerusalem, 1984) 67.

ועוד היה זה יוצאים  
לפעמים מיאור נילוס אל השפה לטרוף טרף  
באדם ובבנהמו מהם ובזמן הפלגה נחרבו פאוד  
יזאו בגוררת השם ונכנסו לכל גבול ההו  
טירפים מהב'ח הביאתיים הנמצאים בגבול

היום נודע אי  
מיישבת פאנשי ספרד ממלאכות פורטוגאל ישמה  
נקראת אי החמסאחים לפי שהם יוצאים שמה  
מן הים ונכנסים בא לטרוף טרף לאכול ואנשי  
האי לוחמים עמהם בחרב וחנית ובמקבות  
והגרון והם היו אוכלים רוב הילדים של אנשי  
האי ועתה כאשר ארכו שם הימים גרשום  
בתחבולותיהם ובכללי זינם מבוא בתוד האי  
אבל יוצאים מן הים אל השפה הסמוכה בלבד  
ורבים מילדי העברים מגורי ספרד האנישט  
מלך פורטוגאל לעבור אל דתו שלח אותו שפה  
זה ייד שנים כולם ילדים אשר אין בהם כל מום  
וכרים ונכבדות יותר מאלו נפשות וכבר  
פרו ורבו שם ורוב האי מיישבת מהם והאי  
הואת היא נטויה מתקו השווה מעט.

Translation on p.117 of dissertation.

(4) Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Samuel, (Jerusalem,  
1955) 169.

אלקנה שטמנו ומחנה אשתו נמשכה בלירות שמואל בנה  
סיבה גוולה, כדי שלא נחרף הלוים ולא נקלל הדר  
אפרים שטמנו יצא רעה לישראל אחריו שמשם גם כן  
זווה כי את הנרכבה.

(א) ויהי איש אחד וגומי, כבר פירשתי בפסקוק וחמי  
אחרי מות משה ונמי שאין מנהג הלשון  
להתחילה הפסטור בוינו כמי שחשב רבי זוז קמחאי  
אבל בא לקסר ולדבק הפסטור ההוא עם הפסטור הקודם,  
ולפי שבסוף ספר שופטים סוטר עניון פלש בנבעת  
ומהאיש ההוא אשר היה דר בירכתי הדר אפרים ומפלגתו  
נישכה רעה רבה לכל ישראל, ספר בכאן אחריו דבר  
בחלוופה, שהויה איש אחד לוי גם כן ובהר אפרים ושםו

Translation on pp. 153-154 of dissertation.

(5) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 170.

... וכבר שהיה מונולוג אלקונית כל  
שנתיים להיוות עולה מעיריו שנה בשנה להשתהות  
ולזבוזות וגורי שהוא פירוש מימים ימיות, כמוו (שמותת  
רב י') ושמורת את החקה היזאת למועד מימים ימיות,  
והיה עולה בחג האסיף שהוא זמן השמחה. או היה  
פי טמואעך ל敉יעך ומרגל לרוגל, שהיה הולך לשילה  
שלש רגלים בשנה, והפירוש הראשון יותר נכון, כי  
כן אמר ובן יעשה שנה בשנה מרי עלותה בית ה'  
ונזורה.

Translation on p.160 of dissertation.

**(6)** Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 170.

... ואמרו שם שני בני עלי חפני ומנחס כהנים  
להן הוא להניר שעם הרות שחפני ומנחס שני בני  
עלי היו במקדש והיו לוחמים הובח בחזקה ושוכבים את  
הנשים כמו שיזכרו אחר זה הננה עם כל זה לא נמנע  
אלקנה מבוא שם שנה בשנה להשתחוות ולזבוקה, כי השש  
לעבירות האל יתברך ולא חשש לרשות הכהנים לגמול  
זקחתו והותרתה בזה השאלה השנייה :

Translation on pp. 161-162 of dissertation.

(7) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 171.

... ולחגגה נתן  
מנה אחת אפסים. וסדרשו המפרשים, אפסים מנה אחת  
נכבותה להשיב אפה וכעסה. ובכפי יונתן: יהוה פירוש  
סנה תראויה לחתකבל בסבר פנים יפות. ושינויות מדברי  
חכמיינו זכרו נום לברכה, לקוחים פמדורש שטואל (שם).  
רבבי לוי בן גרשום פירש אפסים כמו פנים, שהיתה  
ישכחת אצלו וככגוזו פנים אל פנים להשניה בה.  
הנוגדים העתיקו אפסים טרי"יטיש בלוון, וסדרשו  
שנהיה נתן אלקונה סנה אחת בלבד לחנה, והוה לוי  
הרמן אף על זה לא יתכן לא יותר ממנה אחת  
בפי שסביר השם את רחמתה ולא היו לה בנים שיתנו  
להם מננות הרבה כמו לבני פנינה, וזהו כי את חנה  
אהב, רוזה לזר לפי שאהב אותה והיה מתאותה  
שיהיו לו ממנה בנים, ולפי שלא היה לו ממנה בנים  
שיתן להם מננות הרבה היה עזב על היהת ממנה אחת  
כלבך, וכן הביאו רבוי דוד קמחי בשם אביו גם כן  
וההוא פירוש יפה מאד :

Translation on pp.164-165 of dissertation

(8) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 171.

... כי האדם העזב והdroag בנפשו  
על צורה גודלה כשבואהו יגונ מה מפע או רב קטן  
או גדול יזכיר יגונתיו הגדולים ופעול בו היגון הקטן  
ההוא הפעולות גדול, לא מצדדי כי אם מוכרונו הצורה  
העצומה האחרת, ולזה אמר שצורתה הייתה מכעשת אל  
חנה גם כעס אחר בעכור הרעימות, רוזה לוטר  
להקציפה, לא בעכור אותו וכעס הקטן כי אם בעכור  
היגון אשר היה אתה כי סגור ה' בעוד רחמה,

Translation on p.167 of dissertation.

(9) Abrabanel: Comm. to Samuel, (Jerusalem, 1955) 172-173.

...אחוֹסֶב שׁעַל לְפִי שָׁאלָקָנָה  
גֵּשֵׁז הוּא בָּאִים שְׁמָה שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה הִתְאַוֵּב אֲוֹתָם,  
וְלֹכִי שְׁפָעָרִים רָאתָ זֹה לְחֻנָּה חָרָה אֲפֹר עַל הַיוֹתָה  
בְּשַׁתְּכִירָת וְאַבְּדִי אֱלֹהָה עַד מִתֵּי תְּשַׁתְּכִירֵן הַסּוּרִי אֶת יִינָן,  
יְלָא אָמַר זֶה עַל הַשְׁבָרוֹת וְהַיָּין אֲשֶׁר שְׁתָתָה כָּכָה,  
אַבְלָה הִתְהָה זֶה לְעַמְּדֵד עַתָּה נְכוֹנָה שְׁלָא חִיסְף עַד  
לְשִׁתּוֹת יִין וְלֹא תְּשַׁתְּכִיר, וְזֶה שָׁאָמַר עַד מִתֵּי תְּשַׁתְּכִירֵן,  
רוֹצֶה לוֹמֶר בְּכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹט וְהִיא תְּרַפֵּה וּבוֹו רַב, וְלֹכְן  
הִתְהָה בְּהַטּוֹב כְּדִי שְׁתַחַרְחַק מִתְּשִׁכְרוֹת וְשְׁתַסְפֵּר זָמָךְ  
**שְׁתִיָּת הַיָּין מַבְלָג וְכֵל,**

Translation on p.172 of dissertation.

**(10)** Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 173.

כִּי הָיָה (כְּמוֹ שׁוֹכֵר הַמִּרְיָנִים)  
רָאוּי לְאֹוֹת לְחַקֵּן הַמְדוֹת הַמְגֻנֶּת שִׁיקָּרָה לוֹ כְּמוֹ  
שִׁיקָּרָה לִמְאָשָׁרִי הַמְקֻלּוֹת שִׁיטָּוֹ אֲוֹתָם לִצְדֵּק הַמְגַנֵּד  
בְּתִבְלִית הַהַטִּיבָּה, כִּי שִׁיאָרוּ אַחֲרָכָךְ כִּי כְּשִׁוּנוֹתוֹ לְטַבְעָם  
בְּדַרְךְ הַמְאּוֹצָעַ, וְעַל זֶה הַדָּרָךְ צָוָה עַלְיָה לְחַנָּה שְׁלַהְרָתִיק  
הַשְׁכּוֹת תְּרַחְקֵק מְשִׁתִּית הַיּוֹן כָּל שְׁהָוָא, שְׁהָוָא קְצָה  
הַמְגַנֵּד, וְהוֹתָרָה הַשְּׁאָלָה הַרְבִּיעִית, וּבְמִסְכַּת כְּתוּבוֹת פָּרָק  
אַעֲפֵי (רַף ס"ה ע"א) תְּנָא כּוֹס אַחֲד יִפְהָא לְאַשְׁתָּוֹת שְׁנִים  
גְּנוֹת הָוָא לָה

Translation on p.173 of dissertation.

**(II)** Abrabanel:  
Comm. to  
Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955)  
173-174.

ויהי  
ראוי מפני זה שיקראתו שאול, והמפרשים לא נתנו  
בזה סעם נכון. ואחשוב בו אחד משלשה ענייניו. אם  
שכחונה בזה השם ששמו האל בעולם ולכן קראותו  
שמואל, לומר שהאל שם אותו, ואמרה כי מי שאלתו,  
וזה לומר אני שאלתו ממנה והוא שמו בთוך מעי.  
ואם שכחונה בזה השם ששמואל היה ממלך יתרון  
ומסבתו, ויהיה שמי'אל כמו שמואל שהיה ממלך, וזהו  
אמרה גם כן כי מי שאלתו וטמנו היה ונמשכת  
תולדתו. ואפשר עוד לומר ששמואל דיא שמו אל,  
כי כל הרוברים האלקים יקראו בשם הקביה, כמו  
שקרו למונב (בראשית ל"ג כ) אל אלקי ישראל,  
והנביא אמר (ישעיה ט ה) ייקרא שמו פלא יועץ  
אל גבור יגור.

Translation on pp.174-175 of dissertation.

(12) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Samuel,  
(Jerusalem, 1955)  
175.

... ולכן חשוב בו שלפי שאלקנה ותנה אשתו שנים יחו הביאו את הנער אל עלי כמו שאמר, חשה חונה שמא עלי יספיק עליה השאלה החששית אשר עשית בפרשנה הזאת, והיא איך אלקנה לא עשה הגור להיות שמואל נזיר ועשאי חנוה בהיות כמי הדרן האיש מזר את בנו בנזיר ואין האשה מזרת את בנה, لكن אמרה חונה אדוני אל החשוב שלפי ששוניינו אנחנו בשווה מבאים זה הנער שבשווע וערך אחד גם כן היינו שותפים בו אלקנה איש ואנכי אשטו אינו כן, כי בעבורו ובשבתי לכד נולד הנער וזהו בי אדוני רוזה לומר בעבורו אדוני היה זה הנער הנער. וביאר למה היה בסבב ולא בסבב בעלה ואמר אני האשג הנ讚בת עמבה במקומות הזה להחפלו אל ה', וכיוון שאנכי הנ讚בת כאן ולא אלקנה הנה איב כי ובשבתי היה הנער, וכמו שאנכי נ讚בת במקרי הזה ולא אלקנה ככה אל הנער הזה התפלתי אני, (כז) רוזה לומר והוא אלקנה לא החפלו עליו לא במקום הזה ולא בכיתו או במקרי אחר, ואיב כי ובשבתי היה גם כן הנער מפהת התפללה. עוד אמרה ריתן זה לי את שאלתי גור, רוזה לומר והאל יתברך לי גתנו ולא נתן הנער לאלקנה איש, ומזה הולידה חולדה החוייבת, (כח) והיא וגם אנכי השאלתיה לה, רוזה לומר כמו שאנכי נ讚בת על משטרתי עליון ואנכי התפלתי עליו והאל יתברך לי ביחסו בלבד נתנו, הנה אם כן יש יכולת בורי להזכיר ולחתמו לה, וזהו וגם אנכי השאלתיה לה'

Translation on pp.178-179 of dissertation.

(13) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to King,  
(Jerusalem, 1955) 572.

... ואמרו המפרשים שחומר אל נדב שהכה אותו בעשא, כי שאעפאי שתיה רשות ונענש בעשא, לפי שתיה רשות כמוהו ומפני שבעשה לא הימייח בעבור חטא חטא יתרבעם כי לא עשו לקיים דבר הנביא, כמו שעשה יהוא בן נמשי (מלכים ב' ס') אבל עשה זה לרוץ לבו למלוך תחתינו ולפי שלא יהיה בית ירבעי מי שיחלוי על מלכותו הרני כלם, וגם בעבור שהברנו בעת שתיה נדב לווחם מלחותה ה', עם פלשתים בהיותם צרים על גבתוןן, ולי ונראת שבעשה כאשר הרוג כל בית ירבעם היה איבר שתיה עושה זה להיות ירבעם עובד ע"ז ומכויס את השם, ושתיה אומר שעשו לקיים דברי הנביא עליו, והוא אמרו ועל הרשות לעשות האשיטו הנביא עליו, והוא אמרו ועל אשר הכה אותו, ואין חומר לנדב כי אם לכל בית ירבעם שוחר, ר"ל וכל שכן על הדבר אשר הכה אותו שתיה על חטאיהם, ואין השם בעשה בית ירבעם על דבר שנמצא בעצמו?

Translation on pp. 205-206 of dissertation.

**(14)** Abrabanel: Comm. to  
Isaiah, (Jerusalem, 1979) 139.

ארטמן זרים על רומי שלשותם הם עמודי מלכות אדום  
ברתו וראוי היה להזכיר רומי ארטמן זרים לפיו שארטמן  
האטייר אשר שם החשיטנים הנקראים אדרדי-נאליש  
וההגמוניים רוגם הם משארא המלכיות ועל המעס יתבא  
בתוכם איש אחר מהם מרומי וגמ האטייר עצמו הוא  
מן הזרים שישחו גם פעם מזרמת פעם מספדר ופקם  
מאשכנו ומיתר הארץ וואלי שעל כן נקרא ארטמן  
**זרים**

Translation on p. 236 of dissertation.

(15) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Isaiah,  
(Jerusalem, 1979) 67.

וכבר התאמצנו חכמי הנזירים לסתור שתהיה העלמה  
זהות אשת אחו או אשת ישעיהו ותקשו עליו  
קושיות וראיתי לו כורם מה ולהשיב עלייהם להרים מכשול  
מדרך עמי:

הפסוק הראשון שאמ היתה העלמה אשת אחו  
יהיה הבן הנולד חוקיוו בנו  
והוכיח שכבר היה נולד קודם זאת הנבואה וזה חלוף  
לא יתכן ואם הייתה העלמה אשת ישעיהו אין אמר  
אחר זה והיה מוטה לתנאיו מלא רחוב ארץ עמנואל  
ויראה שהיה עמנואל אדוני הארץ וישעיהו ובנו לא היו  
בן ואני משיב על זה שכבר פרושתי שלא היה עמנואל  
חוקיו כי כבר היה נולד תשע שנים קודם מלוך אחו  
אבל אבל היה בן אחר שנולד לאחיו מאשה אחרת או  
יהתה העלמה בתו של אחו ...

Translation on p. 249 of dissertation.

(16) Abrabanel:  
Comm. to Isaiah,  
(Jerusalem, 1979) 241-  
242.

השאלה הראשונה היא לדעת עלי מיל נאמרה  
הנזרים פירשות על אותו האיש שתלו בירושלים בסוף  
בית שני שהי' לדעת' בן האלקי ית' שנתגשם בכתן העלם'  
כמו שטפפורסם בדבריהם ואנכם יונתן בן עוזיאל תרגמת  
על משיח העתיד לבא והוא גיב' דעת חכמים זיל בהרבה  
מדרשווחדים גם כי זה הפסוק האחרון טמונה לנו  
אהליך לו בברבים דרשוהו על משה ובינו כמו שיתבאר  
וכן ראוי פירש עשה הרמביין על הנבואה הזאת שפירשה  
על מלך המשיח ותגאון רב סעדיה פירש הפרשה כולה  
על ירמיהו ופיירש יהה גנים רבים כמו יסיף שניבא על  
אותות רבות וכיוון לפניו כי היה נער וחטא רבים  
נשא אמרו זכור פmedi לפניו לבקש טוביה עליהם וכשה  
לשבח יובל באומרו ואני ככ besch אלוף ואהליך לו ברכים  
רומו אל ארחותו שנתגה יום יומ וכתב עליו הרabiיע  
וכן הרבה רבי מנחם המאיירי שיטה פירש ולא ידעת  
מה טובו ומה יפיו שחוו בו אבל רשי והיר יוסף קמחי  
ובנו הר' רבי דוד קמחי כל' מה אחד פירשו הנבוי הזאת  
כולה על ישראל

ואומר שדעת חכמי הנזרים הוא לפرشה על ישעיו  
הנוצרי שנהרג בסוף בית שני ושליליו אמר  
ירום מאברהם ונשא ממשה וגבה ממלאכי השרת מה  
שי אפשר שיצדק כי אם על הסבה הראשונה שהוא  
גבוה מעל גבוה ושליליו אמר נגוע מוכה ומעונה  
רוזה לומר שהוא היה אלקיים ונגוע ומוכה ומעונה  
ושטפני שבטל עונש הנשומות שהוא סובלות בחטא  
ארם הראשן לנו אמר ועוגנות הוא יסבול והוא חטא  
אבל הר' הו' הוא כולי' כפי הטושבל בטלי' הרבי'

Translation on pp. 256-257 of dissertation.

וחכמי הקראים הרחיבו פה הארכיו לשון  
כגדי חכמי ישראל בהזותם מקדשים את  
חדשיט על פי החשbon וסוד העיבור באמרים  
שהתורה צוותה שיקדרו את החדש על פי הראיה  
ושעל זה אטריה החדש הוות לסת ראשית

...  
את החדש על פי ראיית הלבנה זאת לפני  
בישראל בהיותם על אדמותם איך עליה על רוח  
חכמיות ...  
לבטל מה שצוווה  
התורה סמazonות הראיה ולקבוע החדשיט על  
פי החשbon כחפץ עד שיאמרו שהעדיר בז'  
הגוזל תבטל הראיה ...

... והלא כל ישראל  
עד רבן גמליאל היו קובעין בראיית הלבנה  
וכמו ...

שחתונות האלה ... בדורי מפרשיות ...  
... כלם יכתבו וילן כן ראוי להסביר עלייהם  
דברי שלום ואמת פשוט ענה כסיל כאלותו:

... הנבה ...  
אם כן עצמות המזוהה זאת אינו שיקדרו  
את החדש על פי הראיה בדברי האנשים  
ה האלה אלא שיחיה חדש ניסן ראש החדשיה  
ומה לו להקביה שיקדרו על פי שנים עדים  
שפערמים רבות שוא ידברו ...

ולא יקדשו על פי החשbon בהיות המות  
המספרי ממה שאין ספק בו וטעות הוא ביד  
האנשים האלה בכל חכמתם שאמרו שבארץ  
ישראל לא היו מקדשים אלא על פי הראיה  
כי הנה חמצו שאמר דוד ליהונתן (שמואל כ)  
גהה מהר חדש ... ומיהיכו  
היה יודע דוד שמחור חדש לולי שעל פי  
חשbon היו קובעים ואולי לא תראה הלבנה  
ולא יקבעו מהר חדש ...

... וכל היה נוהגים כל  
ישראל לקבוע החדשיט על פי החשbon ולהסתמכו  
שם הראיה אבל החשbon היה העיקר ולזה  
חמצו מפורש בכתב שआטר (דר' א' ייב ל'ב)  
וסבנוי ישכר ידעבי בינה לעתים לדעת מה  
יעשה ישראל ...  
... וחין לך דבר שוצריך הכנה ובינת  
לקבוע עתים או מועדים כי אם החשbon ...

... אמגט הקראים כדי להתרחק  
סדרכי חכמי ישראל בו חכמתם ... בחכמת  
העיבור ... ובחרו להם  
דרך ראיית הלבנה ... ולא עליה בידם כי על כל  
פניהם צריכין הם לקבללה לדעת עניין החדש  
והשנה ... וכיצד מקדשים ומתי מקדשים ...

... והתיימה מהחכמים איך לא כתה כלימה  
שניהם בקדשם את החדש בכל סקום מבלי  
הסכמה מקום אחד ממקומות אחר ויהיו הקראים  
אשר בארץ ישראל מקדשים ליום אחד ואשר  
בדמשק ליום אחר ואשר בקושטאאנינה ...  
... ויהיא אלה  
במקומות אחד אוכלמים חמץ בפסח ועושים מלאכה  
בימים הכהורות לדעת אנשי מקום אחר ...

**(18)** Abrabanel: Comm. to Leviticus, (Jerusalem, 1964) 130,131.

... ואומנם אמרו ממחורת השבת המועד הראשון של פסח נקרא שבת כטו שנקרא יום תרועה שבתון. ולהיות היום הראשון הראשון של פסח ראש לטופדים נקרא היום ההוא מtag הפסח השבת בה'א הידיעה כי בו שביתת הטלאכה הראשונה שבמועד' ואין לפרש הפחרת השבת בדברי הקראים הטופדים שהוא ממחורת שבת בראשית כלומר היום הראשון מהשבוע שיבא אחר הנפת העומר וכן וספרתם לכת במחורת השבת שמשם תהיה הספירה.

... לכן אין לנו לומר מדברי הקבלה הקדושה שקבלו הראשונים ממשרעה כי הם ידעו דרך זה, שמחורת השבת הוא יום ששה עשר בניסן והנה נקרא יום חמשה עשר שהוא היום הראשון של פסח שבת מפני שהוא היום שבתתו בו המלאכה מהפערדים

Translation on pp. 276-277 of dissertation.

**(19)** Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Exodus, (Jerusalem,  
1964) 206.

... ואגונם משפט  
עין תחת עין כבר בא בקבלה שאינו במשמעותו  
דאלא מלא כן אלא שיסמא לאדם את עיניו בעבור  
מה שהשחית עין חבירו יתחייב פגמים רבים  
שייהי עין ונפש תחת עין כי כבר יקרה  
שאם ינקרו בב"ד עין אדם או יכרתו ידו  
במשפט ימות ויהי אם כן נענש עין ונפש  
תחת עין בלבד. וכך שטען הגאון ונזכר  
בעל ספר הכוור כנגד הקראים המטעשים בזה.

Translation on p. 280 of dissertation.

(20) Abrabanel: Comm. to Exodus, (Jerusalem, 1964) 118.

...וחכמי בקראים כתבו בטעם לא חכש גדי שלא יתעורר הפרה עם העקרין וטעמו שלא יינק הבכור בחלב אמו אחרי עבורי שבעת ימים אלא מיום השטני אתה חייב להבייר ולשון בשול הנה גבול כמו הבשילו אשכלותית ולפי זה הפיר תהיית המזוהה הזאת ביחידת בכוריות אבל מאשר ראיינו המצוה הווא שניות ומשולשת בתורה השכל יורה שדרך קבלת חז"ל הו האמת הגמור ועליו ראי שנסטוך ושאר המחשבות הבלתי המתמעדים:

Translation on p. 285 of dissertation.

**(21)** Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Leviticus, (Jerusalem,  
1964) 138.

... והתרועה שוכר הכהן  
בזה היום היא תרועת השופר לא לדברי  
הקראים הטופים שהתרועה שוכר הכתוב הוא  
הלו ושבח לשם כמו וכל העם הריעו תרועה  
גדולה בהלן. כי לא נמצא מקעה ותרועה  
בימי המועדים כי אם בחצוצרות של כסף ולא  
בקרכן היובל נזכר וביום שמחתכם וממועדיכם  
זה טעת מבוראך כי הנה מה שאמר הכתוב  
וככל העם הריעו מיד ביאר הכתוב שוויה הלו  
ושבח באמוריו תרועה גדולה בהלן. אבל כאן  
בפרשת שלא נזכר הלו ושבח אין ראוי לבאר  
כך יום תרועה יהיה לכם כי הנה השבח  
הלו בכל המועדים היה. ולמה אכדר על זה  
ביחוד יום תרועה

Translation on p. 286 of dissertation.

(22) Abrabanel: Comm. to Leviticus, (Jerusalem, 1964) 147-148.

הנה הקוראים הטרעים פירשו אך בטעו יומם חדש ונור שבא לבאר במה יעשנו הסכמת וועל זה אמר ולקחתם לכם שיקחו הדברים הנזכרים בפרשה לעשות סכמת וכיש בעורא (ס"י ח') צאו הדר והביאו עלי זית ועלי עץ שמן לעשות סכמת כתוב ונור ואין כתוב בתורה עשיית הסכמת. ומאשר הוקשה אצלם פרי עץ הדר אמרו שטעמו עץ פרי ושלכן אמר כפותם بلا ואין כי הכוונה בכפות ולא בפרי ושכחות תפירים והוא עץ הדר או יהיה עץ הדר הוא הנזכר בעורא עלי זית ...

סביר כי יסוכבו בבית ה' בשיר וhalb משלו חוויא וינצטו כסבורי כטו שוכבו בפרוזם וזה בלי ספק פעוט מברא מפעננות. הא' לפני שאם היה ולקחתם לכם ביום הא' ענן הסכתה טפש לא ימלטו הכותבים טכפל ומוחרם מברא. הבי' שהם פירשו ולקחתם לכם ביום הא' שייעשו זה ביום הא' בלבד ואיך יפירושו א"כ על מעשה הסכתה שהיה תג' ה' שבעת ימים לא יום הא' בלבד. והב' כי איך יפירושו ולקחתם לכם על עשיית הסכתה והדברים שישמו בהם כי הנה כבר אמר הכתוב בראשונה בט"ז יום לחודש השבעי הזה תג' הסכתה שבעת ימים לה' ביום הראשון מקרא קדש ונור וחתם מצות המועדים באמצעות אלה טועני ה' וגור. ואיך ישוב אח"ז לבאר ממה שייעשו הסכתה והי שיזה והכתוב לעשות הסכתה ולשבת בהם ז' יסיט יהיה מות או מות ...

... וה' ...  
שאם בא הכתוב לבאר העשביים והעלים שייעשו מהם הסכתות היה לו לומר כמו שנאמר בעורא צאו הדר והביאו עלי זית לעשות סכתת ומזה לו לפרש ד' ענינים ... ואין אלה הדברים בעורא אף כי פרי עץ הדר לא יאות לעשות טפנו סכתה ... והם יוצחו הפסוק שאומר פרי עץ הדר ואמרם שטעמו עץ פרי שעל העץ צה לא על הפרי ...

... סוף דבר כי  
זה כלוי עותם הפסוקים והכוכחים והתימה מהគמיהם הלא ידעו שבני יהודה שבאו לבני בית שני היו מאותב שלו לירושלים מבבל אנשי בית ראשון ויזוז שלא עשו המצוות בבית שני אלא כפי מה שהיה נהוג אצלם בבית ראשון ומפני שהסכתות והוללב ושאר המנימיות הנקלחים עמו היו כל אחד מהם מזוה במפני עצמה נהגו בבית שני לעשות כן ולעשות התקפי' במקדש בימי הרגן ב"ד מינימ שבללב כל ימי בית שני כמו שזכר יוסף בן גוריון חכמי המשנה עשו כן כי לא חדש הם ענין המזווה הזאת בסוף בית שני או בגולה. אבל לקחו המצוות כפי הבנת הפסוקים ואמורות וכפי מה שעשו במקדש כל ימי בית ראשון וזה הוא מטה שירדה אלה כל ימי בית ראשון וזה הוא מטה שירדה על טוחם במה שסרו מדברי הקבלה האמיתית דברי חכמי המשנה ברוך שהברם בהם ובמשנהם:

(23) Abrabanel: Comm. to  
Numbers, (Jerusalem, 1964)  
135 - 136.

... כי משפטת האם אינה קרויה משפטה ובזה טו  
חכמי הקראים טועוית. ראשונה שכתבו שהאחים  
בני האם יורשים כמו האחים בני האב. ו שנית  
שכתבו כי אם יירשת את הבן כמו האב  
ושתיא קודמת אל האחים בירושה כמו אביהם  
וסמכו זה לענין נعمי שמכרה השודה שתיה  
לבנה מחלין אחריו מותג ושלישית שכתבו  
שההמץ' האב והאם בມות הבן ולא היה לו  
זרע ייחלקו נכסיו אביהם ואמרו בשות ואמרו  
כל זה לפי שקיימו וקיבלו שמשפטת האם  
קרויה משפטת כמשפחה האב וכל זה טעות  
סבירה בפסוקי התורה כי שם צוה לחלק  
את הארץ לזכרים ורשות לומר השבטים  
וממשפחותיהם לא לנקבות כלל אם לא לבנות  
צלהחד מכח אביהם לבתי יגער שמו ממשפטתו  
הנה כמו שונבן הוא היורש האמתי בנכסיו  
אביהם כן האב יורש אמתי בנכסי בנו כסאי  
לו זרע שיירשנו והאחים היורשים את האם  
איןם יורשים אותו אלא במת שם זרע  
אביהם הוון ומכך הם יורשים. ואמנם האם  
כמו שהבן לא יתיחס למשפטתךך היה  
אינה יורשת ...  
ואין להביא ראייה מנעמי שאولي היה השודה  
שללה או נתנה בנה אליה במתנה ...

Translation on pp. 298-299 of dissertation.

(24) Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Genesis, (Jerusalem,  
1964) 171.

... ונראה חם אם לאפי שם לבו בקרבו  
לידוך אחר תאוותיו ואם להיותו שחור ומכוער  
ככושי עוזו ובתוואר ובמדותיו כי חם הוא  
מנורת וכל חום בכשיבות ריל שחור בהפץ יפת  
הייפה בצורתו ובמנגנו ...

ואתה ...

תראה איך נמצאו סגולות שלשת האבות האלה  
באותות הבאות מוס ... כי מהם בא כוש  
ומזרים ופוט וכינען שהם כלם עד היום מכוערי  
הمرאה וצורותם שחורות כערוב שטופים בזמה  
ונמשכים אחר התאותות הבהמיות חסרי הסכל  
יתדיעות וטוללי המזינים ומעלות המדות  
והגבורה. ואפנום בני יפת שמלה באו היונים  
ותרומיים מה נאים פעשיהם של אומה זו ומונגים  
ומדינייהם ואופני הנגהנות ובגבורותיהם וכלם  
יפוי תאר וPsi מראה צחו מחלב אדרטו עצם  
ספניני ...

Translation on pp. 314-315 of dissertation.

(25) Abrabanel: Comm. to Genesis, (Jerusalem, 1964) 194.

...ומה גנין אמרו  
הנה נא ידעת מהמפרשים כלם לא נתנו בו  
טעם מספק והענין בכלל זה הוא שבדרך לא  
היית יודע ... מצרים כי לא ירד שם מימי  
... בהיותם עם אשתו בארץ כנען לא היה  
לו ספק לפי שהיתה אשתו ביפיה ובתארה  
כשאר בנות הארץ لكن לא ירא שיקחוה וכאשר  
התעורר לבא מצרים חשב שהיו אניות והנשיות  
שמה כמו שהיו בארץ כנען ...  
... כי אם  
היית יודע עניין המצרים באמת לא היה יודע  
שמה ...  
ועל זה נאמר ויהי כאשר הקוריב לבא מצרים  
כי אז נתחדש לו הספק בראותו שהיו המצרים  
ומצרים כעורים שחורים צעירים ואז אמר  
לשרה ... הנה נא ידעת כי אלה יפת  
מראה את ... בהיותנו בעבר נהר וגט  
בארץ כנען שם כל הנשים מראיתן טוב לא  
הייתי יודע שאת בפרט הייתה אשיה יפת מראה  
לפי שככל שאר הנשים היו כן ולא היתה לך  
מעלה נכרת ... אבל עתה בהיותנו בארץ  
מצרים שהאנשים והנשיות כלם שחורות ומלוות  
ככושים ... עתה ידעת  
כי ... יפת מראה את בערך הנשים המצריות  
וזדבך נבר מפה את הפלג ולזה אמר כי אשיה  
יפת מראה את ולא אמר יפת תאר לפי שהמראת  
הוא הלובן שלה אבל המצרים ועם היותן  
שחורות לא ימנעו מהיונן יסתות תאר שתוא  
בسدור אברילוס ...

Translation on pp. 319-320 of dissertation.

(26) Abrabanel: Comm. to Numbers, (Jerusalem, 1964) 55-56.

שם אמרו שם בחרודו מאשטו  
לא היה אפשר שיתה אלא לאחת טב סבות  
או לשלשתן יתד תא' להיותם כושית כערוב  
כי צפורה הייתה ממון והיתה שחורה כי מדיניהם  
הם ישמעאלים שחורים מכה השם ואותו ואולי  
משה נמנע ממנו לפני שאינה ישרא בעניין

... ואמרו כי אם היה עושא  
כן להיות צפורה שחורה ככושית הנה כشنשא  
אותה כבר הייתה כושית היהפוך כושי עורו  
ועכ"ז לקחה והוליד ממנה בניים. ואם כן מה  
ראה עתה ומה הגיע אליו שנפרד ממנה כי הנה  
לא נתחדש בה עתה הכוויות ומוטב שלא  
לקחה להיותם כושית לא להפריד ממנה אחר  
שלקחה שנים רבות ...

... והתבאר מה היה  
עצם הדבר הזה שהוא על מה שנפרד משה  
מאשטו בעניין המשגיל כי צפורה להיותם מדין  
אשר הוא בארץ כוש היה שחורה ...

Translation on pp. 321-322 of dissertation.

(27) Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Amos, (Tel Aviv, 1960)  
106, 108, 109.

... וענין הלא סבבי כושים ונמר הוא  
שאמר השם לעמו הלא סבבי כושים אתם לי בני  
ישראל שהכושים השחורים מבני כוש בן חם עבדים  
לאזוניהם עבדות עולם כן אתם לי עבדי בהחלת אשר  
העליתו אתכם מארץ מצרים וקניתו אתכם ביד חזקה

...  
ואמנם דרכו המפרשים בפירוש הנזכרה זאת הם  
מתחלפים למה שפירשתי מאי כי הנה רשי פירוש  
הלא סבבי כושים אתם לי למה אמונה מהperf עמלכם  
אחריו שאנוכם שבבים אליו הלא מבני זה באתם כמושים  
שנדייתם אליהם כמו שאמי היהפוך כושי ערו ...

...  
... ואין אני מוציא טענה בכתוב כפי פירושו  
האם בעבור שהוא כלם בני נח או בני אברהם שהוא  
יותר קרוב אלינו יהו שווים לפניו יתברך הלא אם  
עשוי ליעקב נאם כי ואוהב את יעקב ...

Translation on pp. 328-329 of dissertation.

**(28)** Abrabanel: Comm.  
to Amos, (Tel Aviv, 1960)  
109.

... גם כי יותר טוב היה להמשילם לחם שקללו אביו מלכושים והרב רבי אברהם ابن עזרא כתוב בשם יפת כי נשוי הבושים הפקר ואין איש יודע מי אביו ואתם בני אב אחד הייחם כי אני העלייתי אתכם מארץ מצרים ואם כן אני אביכם כמו שאמר משה הלא הוא אביך קדר כי איןכם כמו הפלשתים שהם מכפרור וארם מקיר שהתערכו ולפי שהמלכים שבכם הם גורמו לכם להיות בכני כושיים שלא חזווני לבן השמד אשמיד את הממלכה החטאה שהיא ממלכת ישראל ולא יהיה עליהם עוד מלך כי אני עזרא אתכם בכל הגוים רומו להחלה וורי מדוי ולא יכול צורו ארץ שהוא אמרו לא אשמיד בית יעקב ורך ממלכתו לבודו ולא ידעת כי הגיד ליפת המנגה אשר זכר מהפקר נשות הבושים כי גם אני ראוי מהם בארץ מולדתי אויכלוסין ובאים טירוזות נשותיהם אליהם אם לא כשביה שימשלו בהם אויביהם והם אם כן בוה כשר ואומות ...

Translation on pp. 329-330 of dissertation.