Don Isaac Abravanel: Financier, Statesman and Scholar, 1437—1937.¹

By Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, Ph.D.

Special Lecturer in Semitic Languages and Literatures in the University of Manchester.

I.

The Christian reconquest of Spain during the first half of the thirteenth century inaugurated a vigorous Crusade of the Church for a united Christian nation. Islam retreated to Granada, the southernmost part of Andalusia.

¹ A lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on 24th May, to commemorate the quincentenary of his birth.

As only those works of Abravanel which are quoted were available for the preparation of this lecture a final judgment on his real significance must be deferred to a comprehensive monograph, based on the whole literary remains extant and the literature on Abravanel, which the present writer intends to write in due course. The following studies could, with regret, not be used, as they were, or still are, not accessible. For the life- and political-history of Abravanel: F. Baer’s Die Juden im christlichen Spanien II; for Abravanel as religious philosopher: Jakob Guttmann’s Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel, Breslau, 1916; for the Biblical exegesis of Abravanel: S. Grünberg’s Eine Leuchte der Bibellexegese um die Wende des Mittelalters, Berlin, 1928, which the author kindly sent me on request, but too late for inclusion in this paper. The M.G.W.J., 1937, Heft 3, also contains two articles on Abravanel by S. E. Urbach on Die Staatsaufsässung des Don Isaak Abravanel, and by J. Bergmann on Abrabanel’s Stellung zur Agada. The former is a notable contribution (see p. 464, note 2). This came to my notice only after my paper had been sent to the printer. Be it noted here generally for the whole paper that many questions and aspects of Abravanel’s teaching could not be dealt with, and others which deserve a fuller treatment could only be touched upon. This will be given them in the intended monograph, in which some views propounded here may need revision after a more careful study of Abravanel and his predecessors has been made. A comprehensive history of the Jewish exegesis in the Middle Ages (Bacher ends with Maimonides) is a serious lacuna. To assess Abravanel’s own contribution to Biblical exegesis it is indispensable to compare his commentaries in a very detailed analysis with the previous exegesis. The present paper is therefore only a modest attempt to make a small contribution to that problem.
The whole country of Spain, though divided politically into Castile, Aragon and Navarre, was now opened up for an extensive Christian propaganda, led by the zealous Dominicans, who called upon the Christian monarchs to dissociate themselves from the Jews and to assist the Church in purging the peninsula from both Muslim and Jewish infidels. It is true, the Laws passed by the Lateran Council of 1215 and repeated by subsequent papal Decrees were directed against these two sections of the Spanish population alike, but in practice it amounted in the first place to a life and death struggle against the Jews. In accordance with the discriminating laws of the Church, the kings issued decrees and made laws against their loyal Jewish subjects. They found it, however, very difficult to put these laws, suggested to them by their Christian conscience and the active Spanish clergy, into practice. For the Jews fulfilled an important and indispensable function in the political and economic life of Spain. Represented in all classes of the population, they formed, in particular, a large part of the middle class engaged in crafts, trade, and commerce and were prominent among the king’s financial advisers, and tax farmers. The wars against the Moors were costly and so were later Dynastic troubles. In any case it was the Jewish treasurer or financial advisers and agents who had to supply the necessary money. He who is in charge of the financial administration usually wields considerable political influence as well. It is easy to understand that the Spanish nobility intensely disliked Jews to occupy such key positions by virtue of their ability and loyalty which they themselves claimed by virtue of their birth and position. That the royal house made use of Jewish doctors created additional ill-feeling and the fact that Jews were prominent among the tax farmers made them unpopular among the masses. To complete this dismal picture one need only think of the luxurious life of the few Jews who had risen to the high positions and lived just like the other Spanish Grandees. The crown, however, felt that the Jews were necessary for a smooth functioning of the administration, and were not prepared to dispose of their services. I cannot trace here the development of the “Jewish question” leading up to the disastrous events
of the year 1391, in which the excited mob, led by a fanaticised clergy, indulged in a cruel massacre of the Jews throughout Castile. Thousands preferred death to baptism, but a considerable number took baptism, many of them in the hope of returning to their inherited faith after order had been restored. Among the latter we find the grandfather of Isaac Abravanel who escaped death in Seville, where the family had lived for generations, by embracing Christianity. But he fled to Lisbon and returned to Judaism. The Church was not dissatisfied with the result and the success seemed to justify their methods. They thought that the day could not be far off when all the Jews would, either by persuasion or force, adopt the dominant religion. The political authorities deplored such outbreaks of violence and in most cases intervened successfully to avoid a complete annihilation of the valuable Jewish element. They were, naturally, not opposed to a peaceful propaganda among the Jews. At first tolerance of other religions prevailed in Spain, the Jews enjoyed religious autonomy and an organisation in communities of their own. Although the Government made this concession for reasons of better control and a guaranteed regular income, from taxes and tributes, the Jews benefited from this system and could maintain their cultural autonomy. Gradually the Government gave way to clerical pressure and lent their authority to religious disputations. The Jews had even to attend in their own synagogues missionary sermons by Dominicans (and later also Franciscans). Invitations to public disputations could not be refused, but the Jews had to be very careful in their replies to questions which they had to answer and could not attack openly the Christian dogma. The first disputation took place in Barcelona in 1263, in the presence of the king of Aragon. Raimund Pennafort, head of the Dominican order in Spain and confessor of the king, was in the chair. Pablo Christiani, a zealous convert, could not convince his Jewish opponent, Nachmanides, that the Messiah had already risen in the Divine Christ, by his martyrdom and death the Saviour of mankind, and that the Torah of the Jews had been abrogated thereby. Despite his victory, Nachmanides was sent into exile because he had repeated in a treatise what he had
answered to his opponent. The Church could not suffer defeat, thus the fate of the rabbi should prove to the Christian world at least the superiority of Christianity as interpreted by the Dominican. The Jews were intimidated incessantly by prede-
ciant monks and were exposed to all sorts of humiliation, from the exclusion from holding public offices down to the badge on their outer garments and other distinctions from the Spaniards. They were also forbidden to employ Christian servants. Although these restrictive laws were temporarily rescinded, it was this stigma of outcasts from Spanish society which weighed heavily on the Jewish mind. Discriminating laws, Dominican propaganda, a mob, ready at any moment to fall upon the Jews in the name of Christ, but in reality in the hope of rich spoil, they altogether undermined the Jewish resistance, especially in the higher circles of society where assimilation to the Spanish way of life prevailed. No wonder, that many accepted Christianity hoping to escape spiritual torture and social degradation. The Church did not fail to influence their souls so that their conversion should be followed by sincerity and active parti-
cipation in their new faith. For it did not escape the ever vigilant eyes of the clergy that secretly these New Christians (Marranos) practised their old faith, that they kept friendship with their relatives and Jewish friends. This behaviour threatened to deprive the Church of the fruits of Dominican efforts. The old problem remained, and another disputation was held in Tortosa in 1413 with the object of effacing all traces of Judaism by complete surrender. A new phase in the struggle began with the united efforts of the archbishop Paul of Burgos, formerly Rabbi Solomon Hallewi, the unscrupulous Vicente Ferrer and Benedict XIII. Among the defenders of Judaism was Joseph Albo (1380-1440). Geronimo de Santa Fe, formerly R. Joshua of Lorca, fought for the Church. The question of the Messiah was again the centre of discussion, which ended without the expected result. Terrorism and intimidation continued, although the Jews enjoyed a temporary respite during the four decades following upon Tortosa. Only the union of Aragon and Castile through the marriage between Ferdinand and Isabella in 1474 opened the last phase, ending, as is well known, with the
expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. This time the Marranos were the target of the combined attack of State and Church. The decisive march towards a united Christian Spain began with the introduction of the Inquisition in Spain under Torquemada, the Dominican confessor of the queen. Countless victims demonstrated again and again to their judges that the Church could only secure the unconditional surrender of all the Marranos with their families by a complete removal of the Jews. For these were the real obstacle to the effective cure of the New Christians from the Jewish “disease.” The conquest of Moorish Granada inspired the leaders with such enthusiasm that the king felt impelled to issue the fatal decree in 1492, that all Jews throughout his kingdom had either to embrace the so visibly victorious faith or leave the realm within three months. The damage which would ensue for the financial and economic life in general was, at least for the time being, negligible compared with the great moral success of eliminating the stubborn Jewish heresy from the distinctly Christian Spanish nation.

II.

Into such a world was born Don Isaac Abravanel in 1437, in Lisbon, where his father acted as financial agent to the Court. Isaac received an extensive education in Jewish and secular learning, which enabled him to gain distinction as a writer so great that he can be regarded as the last prominent scholar of the Spanish period in Jewish history. He served king Alfonso as financial adviser till the monarch’s death in 1481. He tells us that he enjoyed royal favour and the friendship of the ministers and courtiers, which speaks for his personality. Being a man of refined culture with a genuine interest in philosophy and theology, his house became the meeting-place of nobles and scholars. This was valuable for the shaping of his thought, despite his self-accusations that he had—in the company of kings, princes and nobles—neglected study and learning.

1 This short biographical note is based on the editor’s Hebrew preface to Abravanel’s Commentary on Daniel.

2 Abravanel’s preface to his commentary on Kings contains an even stronger self-accusation for having forsaken the kingdom of Judah and Israel, his heritage
Alfonso’s successor, suspicious of the friends and advisers of his father, persecuted and put them to death. Abravanel speaks of intrigues and calumnies at Court to which he would have fallen victim had not one of his noble friends warned him to evade going to Court on the royal request. He fled into Castile; this confirmed the king in his suspicion that Abravanel had conspired with his close friend, the Duke of Braganza, against the king. The accusation was entirely unfounded, but the king confiscated Abravanel’s whole property. Finding that Torath haShem was better than thousands of pieces of gold and silver, Abravanel devoted his leisure to study and teaching and began his Commentary on the Early Prophets. He had just begun his Commentary on the book of Kings when he received a summons to Ferdinand of Castile, in 1484, which resulted in his appointment as financial adviser and treasurer to the Crown, an office he held until the expulsion. Their Catholic majesties would certainly not have employed a Jew if he did not serve them loyally and in the interests of the country. Both the king and the queen showed him their favour and it is largely due to his skill and resourcefulness that Ferdinand could finance and conduct the “Holy War” against Granada. It adds a touch of irony to the tragic story of the expulsion that Abravanel should have so conspicuously contributed to the successful campaign against the Moors, since Ferdinand’s victory was the immediate cause of his anti-Jewish measures, and, moreover, that Abravanel served a queen whose confessor was Torquemada. Abravanel tells the story of that expulsion in passionate terms, speaking of the king who wished to bring under the wings of his God who had given him victory over Granada, the people who walk in darkness, the scattered Israel, and to win back to his religion the backsliding daughter or to send them forth to another country. In vain did he offer his own, and all the money and possessions of the Jews. Equally fruitless was the intervention of his friends, the Spanish grandees, for the queen stiffened the king, and the

—the Abravanes claimed Davidic descent—and the interpretation of their history for worldly honours and service of other kings.

1 Loc. cit., and esp. Abravanel’s preface to Joshua in his Commentary on the Early Prophets, Hamburg, 1687.
The decree was made public. On the appointed day 300,000 Jews, led by their God, left Spain without clear object. He describes vividly the many misfortunes the exiles had to endure on the high seas and on land, how they were robbed and slain, died of hunger and pestilence, until within a few years their number had dwindled to ten thousand. He himself came to Naples with his family where he wrote his Commentary on Kings. Living honoured and in peace among the great he served King Fernando. When Charles of Anjou sacked Naples, Abravanel accompanied Alfonso, Fernando's successor, into exile. His house with his valuable library fell a prey to pillaging French troops. After the king's death he found a refuge in Corfu, from there he wandered to Monopoli, where he wrote most of his books. At last he found a home with his son Josef in Venice, where he rendered once more public service in negotiating a commercial treaty between the Republic and Portugal about the trade in spices. His advice was eagerly sought until his death occurred in 1508. Among the chief mourners who brought his dead body to the Jewish cemetery in Padua were the leaders of the city. The man who experienced so many vicissitudes in his life could find no rest even in death, for in 1509 the cemetery was destroyed. Abravanel had served the kings and princes wherever he lived. The experience he gained in his political career found expression in his commentaries and other writings. To these we now turn.

III.

To do justice to the literary work of Abravanel we must place it within the history of his time. He lived at the close

1 Comm. on Daniel, 5b. 1; 6b. r.; 7a. 1. Preface to Kings and Introduction to Comm. on Deuteronomy (in Comm. on the Pentateuch, Venice, 1579). Esp. the Comm. on Daniel contains frequent references to contemporary Jewish history, including the Marranos.

2 A full list of his extant works is given in J. Fuerst's Bibliotheca Judaica, pp. 11/15, or in Jew. Enc. s.v. Abravanel. Abravanel refers frequently in his Comms. to his historical work Yamoth 'Olam from Adam to his own day, the loss of which is the more to be regretted as it could throw light on Abravanel as historian. We could also learn how he used his knowledge of ancient history and his own political experience in addition to his many remarks in his Comms. He also refers when discussing prophecy to his treatise mahaze Shaddai which is also lost.
of an epoch rich in individual scholars whose achievements in philosophy, science and medicine bore fruit outside Judaism as well, and form an integral part in mediæval culture and civilisation. Abravanel exerted an influence on Biblical exegetes, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, next in importance to Maimonides (1135-1204). But the age of Abravanel was no longer that of Maimonides. The unfavourable atmosphere of persecution and humiliation to which Judaism was subjected left an indelible mark upon the attitude of the Jewish thinkers to the tendencies which had arisen following upon Maimonides. Attack from without, disintegration within, made it imperative for the responsible teachers of Judaism to insist on the strictest adherence to traditional teaching and interpretation, and on rigid observance of the traditional Jewish form of living. Moreover, the days when Muslims, Jews and Christians laid more stress on the binding than the separating features of their systems irrevocably belonged to the past. The tendency to harmonise Revelation and Reason gave way to the subordination if not surrender of speculation. This general process did not pass unnoticed in the Jewish camp. Even without it the Jews could not tolerate free thought undermining the fortress of tradition, and they had to struggle for the maintenance of their religion which was discredited as inferior. They honestly believed that they could achieve this only by reasserting the sole and sufficient authority of Written and Oral Torah. Speculation could not be banned but it had to be limited. There was and is only one truth, that of revelation. Speculation can and must help to bear out this truth, but no longer must Scripture be interpreted to satisfy human reason, if need be by ascribing an esoteric, hidden meaning to Scripture. Reason should help to establish the literal meaning in order to interpret tradition for a persecuted people to sustain them in their inherited faith, to give them strength and confidence in a better future, but first of all to make their plight tolerable by expounding to them the truth and beauty of their own religion. It was necessary to make the people immune against the temptations of the Church and the promises of a better life, both spiritually and materially. The Rabbis of the day fought
those who dissolved Judaism into a philosophic system, into pure Ethics and Metaphysics. No wonder that the character of contemporary Jewish literature is apologetic and polemic in the first place. Defence is necessarily conservative. No doubt, those who believed not in the values of philosophy and science, and consequently wished all secular study to be banned, were reactionary. But the conservative majority saved Judaism from destruction, and handed it down intact to following generations. They did not despise philosophy but at the same time they did not allow Aristotle an authority equal (or even superior) to that of the Torah.

IV.

In such an atmosphere Abravanel grew up. Quite naturally he stands on the shoulders of his predecessors and makes ample use of their interpretations of the Bible. He consulted the sages of the Talmudic period whose authority he acknowledged and, where possible, followed. There are, however, instances where he disagrees or offers an alternative interpretation by expounding the literal meaning of the passage in question. He frankly admits this his indebtedness, but he neither follows nor rejects earlier findings blindly. He uses his own judgment, supported by grammatical knowledge and wide experience in the world of affairs. He is undoubtedly greatly influenced in his exposition of the Pentateuch, the Earlier and Later Prophets, and of Daniel by Maimonides, Nachmanides (1194-1270) and Gersonides (1288-1344), and to a lesser degree by Rashi (born 1040) and Ibn Ezra (1091-1167). But he uses them critically and upholds his own against them. His commentaries are far more than a mere compilation, or a convenient summary of earlier views. This is as true of his method as of his comments in detail.¹ He reminds one rather of the modern style of Biblical commentaries with their critical discussion of prior exegesis. Thus, whole chapters in his Commentary on Daniel, e.g. deal

¹ Cp. the devastating verdict of the eminent Steinschneider in his *Polemische und apologetische Literatur der Juden etc.*, Leipzig, 1877, p. 375, with n. 55 to the contrary.
with such critical discussions, followed by a sound criticism of their attitude to and interpretation of individual passages. After giving his reasons for and against in a clear exposition he states his own view. Such scholarly procedure is something novel in the history of Biblical exegesis, Jewish as well as Christian. Expressing his disapproval of preceding Jewish exegesis in unmistakable terms he is nevertheless not so conceited as to fancy himself in sole possession of the truth, but admits other interpretations as also possible and good. This measure of objectivity prompted him to introduce into Jewish exegesis an element hitherto unknown. He made a careful, extensive study of the exegesis of the Church fathers and mediæval Christian scholars. This cannot be dismissed by a reference to the apologetic and polemic character of contemporary Jewish literature. True, the Messianic prophecies had to be defended against the Christian claim that Isaiah’s predictions pointed to Jesus, and that Daniel’s Fifth Empire referred to the reign of the Antichrist, to quote only two obvious examples. But the numerous quotations of, and references to Jerome and Nicholas of Lyra in the first place, and occasionally to Isidore of Seville, Porphyry, Bede, Leo Africanus and Albertus Magnus and even to the above-mentioned Paul of Burgos and other renegades throughout Abravanel’s commentaries, cannot be attributed to such a tendency. Thus we believe there is good reason to ascribe this scholarly attitude to the coming of the new age, and to see in this readiness to look for truth where it can be found, be it even in quarters antagonistic or openly hostile to Judaism, the beginning of scholarship for its own sake which characterizes the Renaissance. This is confirmed by Abravanel’s use of Latin Chronicles dealing with the history of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, as well as with that of Roman antiquity. His material far exceeds what he found in Josef

1 Comm on Daniel, 53a. r., the sage Isidro. For want of space I cannot give references for all names and statements. Porphyry is in this commentary twice referred to as a Christian, once rightly styled a Greek philosopher. Probably Jerome is the source for Abravanel’s acquaintance with Porphyry’s Commentary on Daniel which is no longer extant.

2 Frequently referred to as the Chronicles of the Kings of Persia, e.g. in loc. cit. 41a. r., giving preference to them against the sages.
ben Gorion’s *Josippon* (Pseudo-Josephus). Moreover, it generally is not merely embellishment but forms part of the argument, be it to prove the accuracy of the Biblical narrative, to explain it, or to provide a historical background. Though this knowledge and its application do not make Abravanel a humanist in the strict sense, they are characteristic of his personality which is otherwise so typical of the conservative tendency of that period in Judaism whose last representative Abravanel is. Through this side of his personality he clearly reaches over into the next age of human thought. A few examples may illustrate this. He speaks of the various forms of the constitution of Ancient Rome, quotes Vergil, Ovid and other Latin authors in commenting upon Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in *Daniel*, and states, in this connection, that Circe knew how to change man into an animal. Or the expression *as the appearance of horses*, used for the army in *Joel* ii, 4 reminds him of the centaurs whom Hercules had captured. It may be argued that all these are minor details without significance, testifying merely to a certain degree of *Bildung* of the author Abravanel. Taken individually by themselves, this cannot be denied, but grouped together, they make a whole which cannot be overlooked if seen in connection with what can only be called the beginnings of research and of a strictly scientific approach. Not only does Abravanel trace the story of the queen of the Amazons and Alexander the Great, told by Gersonides, back to *Josippon* as the primary source, but he shows a truly scholarly mind in a significant text-critical remark on a passage in the 39th chapter of the *Pirke d’R. Eliezer*. This forms the first part of Abravanel’s *Y’shu’oth M’shiho*, in which he collected all the Midrashic-Talmudic evidence for the Messiah. In certain editions, he informs us, he found a variant reading and expounded the

1 I could only use the Latin translation, ed. Oxford, 1706. Abravanel’s sources in addition to the *Josippon* (s. Book. VI, ch. xliii, for various constitutions of Rome, elaborated by Abravanel) must yet be found, especially what is meant by the “Chronicles of the Latins,” etc.

2 Comm. on *Dan.* 33b. 1./34a. r.

3 Also mentioned in A. Merx: *Die Profetie des Joel*, Halle, 1879, a model comm. which should find successors for all the Biblical books! It is noteworthy for a balanced judgment on Abravanel as a commentator.
passage also according to this variant, adding if it is correct.  
Quite clear and convincing a case for the scientific approach is
presented in his attitude to such questions as date and author-
ship of the *Earlier Prophets* or some of the Hagiographa. In
order to realize the characteristic novelty of his method a few
remarks are necessary on Abravanel's attitude to his Jewish
predecessors as he describes it himself, in contradistinction to
his own method of Biblical exegesis. This he defines as an
attempt to bring out the clear, literal meaning of the text
(*P'shat*) by laying stress on the general meaning and import
of the Biblical books. He deplores the method of Abraham
ibn Ezra and of Nachmanides who like to speak in riddles, as
well as that of Gersonides who aims at expounding the moral
value of the narratives. He especially carps at the latter
method, which he considers vain in so far as the words of the
prophets themselves are valuable ethically and intellectually.
He likewise condemns Ibn Ezra for his grammatical exegesis
and the superficiality of his literal interpretation which by its
brevity is insufficient for the true explanation of the real meaning
of Scripture. But in reality he follows him often in detail,
expressly stating so! (He would have done well to adopt his
brevity also!)
Rashi is, for him, over-dependent on the Mid-
rashic explanations of the sages, a point which is nearer to the
truth though rather one-sided. a He naturally acknowledges
Rashi's explanation where he finds it good. His own use of the
haggadic material of the sages distinguishes him from Rashi in
that he subjects this material to criticism and tries to find the
reason for such an interpretation which he very often adopts.
But it is different with Nachmanides who states in the Preface
to his Commentary on the Torah, in strikingly similar terms,
his intention to expound the true sense of the Law. But we
venture to think that Abravanel is more consistent in putting

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1 2a. r. Note also the importance of the Exodus from Egypt as the proto-
type of the future ultimate Redemption, which will also take place in the night
of *Passover*.

2 *Comm. on Early Prophets*, Introd. 4a. r./l., where he also blames R. D.
Qimhi for not giving references to earlier commentaries, Midrashim and sayings
of the sages, quoted by him.
his method—which is, in principle at least, also that of Nachmanides—into practice as is amply testified by a large number of dissenting interpretations. He differs more widely from Gersonides, though he follows his form of interpretation by first explaining the words and then giving the meaning of the passage or a larger section. A comparison of the two comments on the first verses in *Genesis* e.g., however, shows that, although most of the twelve words which Abravanel thus explains are also explained by Gersonides, Abravanel keeps much more within the limits of a linguistic and literal interpretation, whereas Gersonides rationalizes as a metaphysicist. The fact that Abravanel makes ample use of philosophical terminology must not lead us to assume that his interpretation is philosophical and aims at the esoteric meaning of Scripture. He does not see any need to write a rational guide to the perception of God on the basis of Scripture like Gersonides. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to look in Abravanel’s commentaries for an exclusive application of the method of *Pshaf*. He gives sometimes symbolical and figurative explanations but makes it clear

1 E.g. in the question what God created first (s. Comm. on *Pentateuch*, Introd. to *Genesis*), where he also criticizes Ibn Ezra, Gersonides and Rashi. Or, in the question of the creation of the angels, where he censures also Maimonides and Bahya. In commenting on the meaning of the light (ha’or) the views of Nicholas of Lyra and of the commentators of the nations are in addition refuted. Abravanel finds the sages of the Gemara more helpful, who know the way of God, a very characteristic attitude. Other similar phrases run: *the views of these Rabbis* (Maimonides, Nachmanides etc.) *do not agree with the testimony of Torah nor with the words of the sages*; or, *such an interpretation is strange to the literal meaning of Scripture*. Disagreement with Nachmanides, Gersonides, etc., is especially important in the question of the revelation of the Torah to the whole nation. In his comment on *Deut.* xxviii, 15 ff., Abravanel fiercely attacks Nachmanides because for him these verses point to the first Temple, its destruction and the Babylonian exile, as well as to the second Temple. This is intolerable for Abravanel, who nowhere admits any reference to the second Temple and a second exile, for the return from Babel was not the promised Redemption. The Deuteronomic passage, as all other predictions, refer to the final Redemption. The Jews still live in the first Exile, the second Commonwealth was only an episode. Cp. also Comm. on *Daniel*, 61b. 1.

2 Cp. his identification of the angels with the Separate Intelligences (Comm. on *Genesis*, Introd.) or the expression in *Ezekiel* xi, 19, *heart of stone* (*Y’shu’oth M’shiho*, 39b. 1.). Especially the last example is instructive for Abravanel’s concession to the figurative method if a literal meaning is incompatible with
that such a meaning is additional to the verbal significance of the particular passage. He admits a deviation from the P'shat only in such very rare cases where the literal meaning is evidently contrary or inaccessible to human reason, thus distinguishing himself sharply from Maimonides and also Gersonides. This difference is the result of Abravanel's conviction that the divinely revealed Torah is essentially clear in its own terms, and that man can understand the obvious meaning of Scripture with the help of traditional exegesis and his own discerning faculty. By no means must he read into the Bible philosophical theories, which are foreign to Scripture, nor rationalize the Biblical narratives. Despite his indebtedness to previous Jewish exegesis, there is in his clear reasoned argument, combined with a deep knowledge of affairs and a systematic treatment of particular problems arising out of the text, sufficient originality in his commentaries to claim for him high rank as a creative exegete. A number of questions and doubts dealing with the general contents of the books and real difficulties of the text introduce his comments. By that he achieves a unity of treatment of that text and indicates that a solution of these questions brings out the meaning, importance and teaching of the book. Further, he can thus best deal with the various opinions expressed by his Jewish and Christian predecessors and also present his own views. If many of the questions are thus given by his careful study of previous exegesis with the view of answering them satisfactorily, it may be argued that Abravanel kept strictly within the limits set for him by his mediaeval milieu. The only advantage of his method would then be a systematic presentation. This should not be belittled, for his method of reason. Or the four beasts in Daniel are explained as heavenly princes (Comm. on Dan., 14a.). For a symbolical interpretation see Comm. on Leviticus, Introd., where he adduces in addition to Gersonides, whom he here praises, two more reasons for the choice of the three kinds of cattle: (1) baqar points to Abraham (cp. Genesis xviii, 7), kehes to Isaac, and 'ez to Jacob (cp. Gen. xxvii, 9), whereas by gozel and tur Moses and Aaron are meant. (2) These kinds of cattle and birds were chosen as symbolic for the Israelite nation in connection with such passages as Amos iv, 1, or Hosea iv, 16. Because of Isaiah's comparison (in ch. liii) with son and rahel the Israelites are commanded to offer these kinds as a substitute for their own flesh and blood.
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adducing every available piece of evidence, positive as well as negative, is in itself a first step in scientific research. But this procedure which is a novelty in Biblical exegesis is outweighed by the courageous manner in which Abravanel lays his finger on real difficulties in the text as not even Ibn Ezra has done before him. He thus laid the foundations of the historico-critical "Einleitungswissenschaft". Whether these questions and doubts are due to scholastic influence cannot easily be determined. An obvious comparison with the frequently quoted Nicholas of Lyra's Postilla\(^1\) to the Pentateuch has so far not convinced us. The fact that he lived at the end of an epoch, the characteristic feature of which was the endeavour to maintain and safeguard a rich heritage, and to repair the breaches and cracks in the wall of tradition, quite naturally suggested to a man of affairs the need to sum up what had been achieved hitherto, and to add to it wherever he had something relevant to say. For, although there was a genuine desire for study and learning in him, he was, as a realist, conscious of the necessity to sustain the shattered hopes of his generation, to strengthen their courage, and to support them in their effort to hold out and survive the tragedy of the expulsion. He intended by expounding to them the good tidings of the prophet Daniel "to rouse his people Israel from the sleep of Exile" so that they might take to heart the promises of Redemption to fill the downhearted with new confidence.\(^2\) But that Abravanel, in addition, could appeal to Christian Bible scholars (Buxtorf the younger, Buddeus, Carpzow and others) and command a place in the science of exegesis outside Judaism as well, is due, not so much to the fact that his criticism of the Christian claim on the Old Testament as pointing to the Messiahship of Jesus represented an important challenge which they felt impelled to refute,\(^3\) but rather to his novel approach to the composition, date and authorship of the Biblical books. For this is much more important. His investigation into the general character and meaning

\(^1\) Edition Bale, 1506. For Rashi's influence on Nicholas see A. J. Michalski in a careful study on Lev., Num. and Deut. in ZAW, 1915/16 in addition to the literature quoted in Encycl. Jud., Band x.

\(^2\) Comm. on Dan., 7a. 1./8a. r.

\(^3\) See Fürst, loc. cit. (n. 6).
of Scripture is executed under the four categories of Greek philosophy: Purpose, Matter, Agent or Author, and Form.\(^1\) Applying the first, second and fourth categories to the question of the division of the Canon he contrasts the traditional Jewish division into Law, Prophets and Hagiographa with the Christian division into four parts (legal, historical, prophetic and Wisdom literature). He objects to their classification of David among the prophets with his book of Psalms and to sapientes as designation of the Hagiographa, thus putting them on the same level as the writings of Aristotle and other philosophers, whereas in reality they are composed with the aid of God (b'ruah haq-qodesh). He himself divides the Canon according to the time of the composition of the several books. Chronologically the Law comes first as being written before the entry of Israel into Canaan. All books written during the period of the Hebrew monarchy in Erez Yisrael before the Exile are assigned to the second group.\(^2\) The third group belongs to the period following upon the destruction of the Temple, the Exile and subsequent return.\(^3\) Here is at any rate an attempt to apply one guiding principle to the whole corpus of Scripture while evading the question of growth and close of the Canon, and avoiding giving reasons for placing the several books according to subject matter and form.\(^4\)

The discussion of authorship reveals considerable critical acumen. Thus, he states that because of seven passages containing the phrase unto this day\(^5\) Joshua could not have written his book, for this phrase denotes clearly that the book was written after the events had happened. He is confirmed in that opinion by the narrative of the lot of Dan which must also belong

\(^1\) E.g. in his comment on Exodus xix, and in his Introd. to Comm. on Levit.
\(^2\) I.e. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbukuk and Zephaniah. This is, he avers, in accordance with the character of the Scriptures and of the statement of the sages in the Seder 'Olam (Rabba), frequently quoted by him. Its influence on his historical comments will have to be defined. The Psalter, Proverbs and Qoheleth belong to this same period.
\(^3\) I.e. Ezekiel, Esther, Ezra, and Chronicles (written by Ezra). After the return from exile were written Haggai, Zechariah and Mal'achi.
\(^4\) Preface to Joshua, 1b. r./2a. 1.
\(^5\) Loc. cit. 2a. l./b. r. bottom. Quoted in their order of occurrence they are: iv, 9; v, 9; vii, 26; ix, 27; xiv, 14; xv, 63; xvi, 10.
to a much later date, for the war of Dan falls in the period of
the Judges towards the end. 1 Samuel wrote it as well as Judges,
whereas he wrote of his own book only those chapters which
deal with events in his own day. The other portions of Samuel
were written by the prophets Nathan and Gad. It was Jeremiah
who collected the whole material and made the present book of Samuel out of it. In doing so Jeremiah—according to Jewish
tradition, shared by Abravanel, the author of the book of Kings
—undoubtedly added words to explain statements and facts
as he understood them on the basis of his own experience, and
therefore he said unto this day. 2 But not only experience but
also God guided the prophets who worked upon older chronicles
when they collected and selected their material. Otherwise
they would not have been able to distinguish truth from un-
truth, and what is necessary from what is not. For it is the
way of scribes and recorders to praise or criticize more than is
fitting out of love and hatred. Therefore, the prophets could
write everything in truth and perfection only by being taught
by God. In that way Abravanel vindicates the prophetic
character of these four books. 3 The discussion why the book
of Ruth—written according to Jewish tradition by Samuel—
is placed in the Canon under the Hagiographa and not under
the prophets, serves as another example of Abravanel's positive
and creative criticism. From a chronological point of view
these stories should be written in Judges. But Judges deals
primarily with the happenings to Israel and the judges in
general. Thus, particular things which happened to Jews in

1 Cp. Judges, xviii, esp. v. 31 and xix, 47, with the whole section from 40 ff.
Similar reasons are advanced for the view that Samuel did not write his book
(cp. v. 5 and vi, 18); before all the phrase in ix, 9: for he that is now called
a prophet was beforetime called a seer clearly points, for Abravanel, to a much
later date after Samuel's death when the customs had changed. This example,
together with another to this day (11. Sam. vi, 8) betray considerable under-
standing of the chronological and historical problems in these books. Against
Jerome's name Regum for the book of Samuel Abravanel defends the name
Samuel for the perfect judge and David as the perfect king, the more so since
Samuel had written the part dealing with Saul and David.

2 Loc. cit. 2b. r.

3 2b. I. The profound problem of prophecy and its difference from ruah
haq-qodesh was discussed only by Maimonides in his More II, ch. 45, wherefore
Abravanel discussed it at length in his lost treatise mabate Shaddai.
At this period but did not affect the whole of Israel are left out. Now, Samuel was personally interested in the family history of David, therefore he traced this history back and wrote *Ruth* as a separate Scroll after he had completed *Judges*. As he did so of his own free will and was not commanded by God, such a book composed in honour of David could not be put on the same level with the prophetic writings. This argument shows at least that Abravanel felt a real difficulty and he betrays a critical mind in his attempt to solve it. For him, the several Biblical books formed an organic unity, consequently he wished to bring out the meaning of the book as a whole rather than of the single words. His problem, therefore, was to explain why sections or passages—seemingly out of place for various reasons (historical, chronological or those of character or contents of the book)—occupy their present position, and justify it. Thus he explains the position of Psalm xviii in II. *Samuel* xxii, arguing that it was fitting that David should express in a general song his thanks to God for His visible support in all his battles, and for the successful completion of the wars. Struck by the numerous variants in Psalm xviii in the Psalter as compared with the same in *Samuel*, Abravanel explains the divergence by making a distinction between two recensions resulting from the different time, circumstances and purpose. In *Samuel* we have a spontaneous dialogue between David and his Creator, composed in David's youth. But when David composed his

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1 *Loc. cit.* 3a. r. Here Abravanel puts and answers the question why *Chronicles*, containing many prophetic stories, is placed with the Hagiographa: (1) Its authors were Ezra and Nehemiah, who were no prophets. (2) They had not received the Divine command to write it. (3) Not by means of prophetic inspiration did they write it but culled the stories from the prophets and Hagiographa which were in their midst, changing facts and proper names in order to improve the understanding of these stories. Moreover, Ezra intended by writing *Chronicles* to set a monument to David and his house as there were left only the two tribes of Benjamin and Juda and as Zerubbabel was of the house of David. He continued the story in *Ezra* (return from Exile, building of the second Temple). As he considered both books as one, the last words of *Chronicles* are actually the beginning of *Ezra*. Having the glorification of David in mind, Ezra left out everything which could be detrimental to his memory. In this way Abravanel solves the difficulties of repetitions or omissions in *Chronicles* compared with *Samuel*. (Preface to *Samuel*, 47a. r./l.)

book of Psalms in lonely old age he made several changes in
the wording in order to make it more intelligible to the lonely
soul in prayer. Moreover, apart from his desire to make an
originally intimate dialogue accessible to the understanding of
the community, literary and stylistic considerations prompted
him to improve the expression in accord with poetic custom.¹
Abravanel ranks Jeremiah next to Moses, the unsurpassed
prophet, as regards perfection of Imagination, but he is aware
of his stylistic shortcomings. These he tries to explain by
pointing out that Jeremiah had to enter upon his prophetic career
when still young. He had not yet mastered the language, the
right arrangement of words, the beauty of metaphor (this is
hardly justified!), therefore he rightly said: Ah Lord God,
behold, I cannot speak: for I (am) a child. Isaiah was of royal
blood, enjoyed an excellent education at Court, and therefore
knew how to write beautifully. The other prophets prophe-
sied in mature age, experienced in the affairs of the world,
whereas Jeremiah, descended from the priests of Anathoth, a
small provincial place, could only use a language corresponding
to the stage he had reached when he was commanded to prophesy.²
In this connection we must mention Abravanel’s attempt to
explain the divergence between the same stories told in Kings,
Chronicles, Isaiah and Jeremiah. He distinguishes between the

¹ Comment on II. Samuel xxii, p. 100a. r./l. He thus explains the change
of the second kaf (Sam. v. 1) into yad in the psalm, repeating this process system-
atically for all the variants. Another example of his tendency to deal with a
question in its proper place completely and systematically is served in his
Mashni’a y’shu’ah when he comments on Obadiah. As this book deals exclus-
ively with Edom, Abravanel discusses here all prophecies directed against Edom
collected from the other prophets under the following aspects: to whom, to
what event, and to what date do they refer, did they come true or have they still
to come true. This is of greatest importance for their bearing on the coming
of the Messiah (58b. l.).

² Comm. on Jeremiah in: Comm. on Later Prophets, Amsterdam, 1641,
p. 96a. r./l. The phrase: thus far (are) the words of Jeremiah at the end of
ch. lii. suggests to Abravanel that Jeremiah could neither have written the last
chapter in his book nor in Kings. Ezra or the “Men of the great Assembly”
transferred the last chapter of Kings to the end of Jeremiah when they collected
the books and arranged the Canon for two reasons. (1) The reader thus knew
that Jeremiah’s prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem had come true and
(2) to link it up with the book of Ezekiel (Introd. to Comm. on Early Prophets,
3a. l./b. r.).
historical and the prophetic treatment of these stories, corresponding to their respective purpose and context. Thus, Jeremiah narrates in Kings the story of Hezekiah as part of the history of his reign, whilst Isaiah told it under the aspect of prophecy. Or a story is used as a sort of historical background and as a verification of a particular prophecy. The prophets used the Chronicles of the kings of Judah which were written down simultaneously with the events, but for their own purposes.¹

Illustrations by means of comparison between Jewish, Roman or contemporary institutions and offices, and a keen political sense enrich Abravanel's exposition of details, such as his remark on 1. Kings iii, 1 ff. that Solomon married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, not because he loved her and was enamoured by her beauty, but for political reasons. It was advisable to gain peace with and the friendship of a great power by such a dynastic marriage.² How contemporary events occupied his mind and directed his thought is evident from remarks and comments in his Commentary on Daniel (Ma‘y‘ne hay-y‘shu‘ah) and in his two other Messianic treatises (Y‘shu‘oth M‘shi‘ho and Mashmi‘a y‘shu‘ah). The meaning and first aim of the visions of Daniel is to encourage, by the parable of the four empires which will be destroyed, the people of Israel to return in repentance to God and to obey Him. That this is addressed to his own generation is evident from the comment on Daniel's character: and we learnt also (a lesson) for the affairs of the nation in Exile that it is fitting to act like Daniel in holiness and segregation, in seeking (the company) of the wise, in meditation on the Torah and in true and loyal service of

¹ As note 2, p. 463.
² Comm. on Kings, 10b. 1. The Commentaries on Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings and Daniel contain much material for Abravanel's political thought together with theoretical statements on political philosophy in his Comm. on Maimonides' More, e.g. I hope to deal with this problem in full in the monograph, with special regard to the question in how far Abravanel's own political experience led him to accept or reject the current theory, influenced by Plato. He draws a parallel between the recorder in 1. Kings iv, 11 ff., and the Roman procurator fiscalis or between the king's friend and the major domus (loc. cit., 17b. r.). The life at Solomon's Court is illustrated by references to Court officials and practices in contemporary Spain and France.
kings. Interesting is his interpretation of the sufferings of the Marranos and of contemporary history: that in the midst of all the anguish and persecutions many of our nation leave the religious community and this is heresy, for through the wickedness of the (Christian) nations hundreds of thousands of Jews have forcibly left the Lord . . . “until all kingdoms are changed to heresy” shows that this refers to all nations in general or to the wicked in particular, be it to Rome where our own eyes see in the kingdom of Spain that heretics increase and where they burn them because of their heresy ‘in thousands and myriads’. Also all the priests and bishops of Rome in this time run after profit, accept bribes and do not care for their religion, for heresy shines out on their forehead. . . . He saw in those happenings clear signs of the times, indicating the birthpangs of the Messiah, for he lived in the expectancy of the Messiah, of the end of the Exile and of the promised Redemption (G’ulah). The prophecy of Daniel was about to come true. Rome, the fourth empire, was in a state of sinful corruption the end of which was death and destruction, and the fifth empire, that of the king Messiah would then dawn upon mankind and bring Redemption to the righteous of the Jews and all nations. Therefore Daniel is set as an example to the Jews. As he was saved by God so Israel will witness Redemption if they but follow Daniel.

Abravanel’s Messianic treatises owe their origin to two reasons. The first practical reason was already stated: he wanted to encourage his fellow Jews by an appeal to be prepared, morally in the first place, for the imminent coming of the Messiah sent by God, who would deliver them from all their sufferings. The second reason is one of defending the current Jewish view on the Messiah against Dominican attacks, more satisfactorily than Nachmanides. Thus, the problems discussed in the Y’shu’oth and Mashmi’a correspond exactly to the questions in the Disputation of Barcelona. Moreover, Geronimo de Santa Fe had again tried in vain to prove from

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1 Comm. on Dan., 25a. r. Another similar exhortation is on 38b. r.
2 Y’shu’oth M’shiho, 21b. 1/22a. r. and Comm. on Dan., 87a. r./l. The standard work on the Marranos is: History of the Marranos by Dr. Cecil Roth, 1932.

3 As note 1 above.
Talmud and Midrash Christ's divinity and Messiahship and had afterwards repeated his claims and accusations in two treatises. This fact alone necessitated a competent Jewish reply. Abravanel polemises against Nachmanides who held that no Jew was obliged to believe in the Haggadah when Pablo Christiani quoted certain haggadoth which seemed to support the Christian claim. Abravanel investigates in systematic manner the whole haggadic material and seeks an answer to the controversial points raised in the Disputations. He had to show that, apart from the Messianological passages in the Bible, there are in Talmud and Midrash unmistakable Messianic predictions which can claim an authority equal to the Biblical ones if they are correctly interpreted. In this attempt he marks a definite advance on his Jewish predecessors and with great exegetical skill he succeeds in vindicating the Jewish point of view. In addition, he rightly points out in his preface to the Y'shu'oth that the commentators of the Talmud (as is known) do not comment on the haggadoth but are only engaged in the exposition of the miswoth (Commandments) in making clear what is forbidden and what is allowed. This statement testifies to the tendency of these centuries when, under the influence of the French and German schools of Rabbis, study centred almost exclusively round the Talmud and the exposition of its Halakhah. Abravanel could claim to fill a real gap in contemporary Jewish literature.

All the haggadic evidence was collected and systematically sifted in respect of four questions. The first question, whether the Messiah had already come, or whether the appointed time for his coming was drawing near, shows how real such an investigation was at that time. The third question dealing with his nature (whether divine or as mere man, like one of us, or another separate intellect), and the fourth whether the Torah will be abrogated in its entirety or in parts when he comes, Abravanel admits that the Rabbis had no power to refute the Dominican claim freely. Therefore he interprets these haggadoth. The Rabbis would have exposed themselves and their communities to real danger had they done so.

He mentions R. Solomon ben Abraham Adret (1235-1310) and R. Yedayah ha-Bedarsi (ca. 1270-ca. 1340) who began to deal with the Haggadah, but they had not treated the haggadoth he himself is going to interpret.
are both no less vital though of a more polemic nature.  Here Abravanel is forced to relinquish the literal meaning of the passages and to aver that the first rabbis spoke in riddles and similes in order to instruct us in the aim of the stories rather than in their verbal meaning. In his Mashmi'a he naturally quotes the same passages as do his Jewish predecessors in their Messianic treatises. But his treatment singles him out by the completeness and systematic arrangement of the material which is discussed in the light of the four questions. His argument is broader, including frequent references to past and present history, especially that of ancient Rome, both heathen and Christian. He emphasizes again and again the epoch-making conversion of Constantine the Great, and—quite in keeping with the teaching of the mediæval Church—that Constantine had surrendered the rule over Rome to Pope Silvester. This agrees well with the interpretations of the prophecies against Edom and in particular of Daniel's fourth Empire (Rome = Edom). His knowledge of Roman history enabled him to give the prophetic and haggadic predictions a more concrete and therefore a more convincing interpretation.

It still remains to show what sources he used. He himself cites only The Chronicles of the Latins, Josef ben Corion and the Latin text of Flavius Josephus as furnishing some information. Though Abravanel distinguishes between the two he is inconsistent in his judgment, or rather condemnation, of Josephus.

1 He refutes frequently the views of Nachmanides, and as far as he argues on philosophical grounds also Maimonides.

2 Here he follows Maimonides (More, ii, ch. 47).

3 For a full treatment of Abravanel's Messianism see J. Sarachek: The Doctrin of the Messiah in Mediæval Jewish Literature, New York, 1932. This book makes it unnecessary for me to reproduce here a summary based on a careful study of the three Messianic treatises carried out before I had access to Sarachek's book. Unfortunately the development of thought and argument in the various authors is not worked out in the study nor is the influence of the earlier on the later writers clearly indicated by references so that a critical study of Abravanel's own contribution and his indebtedness to previous authors must be reserved for the monograph. As a basis Sarachek's book is very useful as regards the material. I regret that I could not use A. H. Silver's A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel, New York, 1927.

4 His acquaintance with Christian Dogma and doctrines can be seen from passages like 66a. 1. and 75a. 1. in his Comm. on Daniel.
Moreover, his historical sense, otherwise good, failed him in
that he takes Josippon in most cases where he uses him as a
historical source in the strict sense. He does so, however,
with the critical reserve peculiar to him when statements found
there do not tally with tradition or Latin histories.\(^1\) His
knowledge of Roman history, which filled him with admiration
for that ancient Rome whose rule is far above all other rule like
Heaven is above Earth, in wisdom and bravery,\(^2\) he found par-
ticularly useful in interpreting Daniel's visions in keeping with
the course of history. Contrary to Gersonides\(^3\) he identifies
the small horn with the Pope. Papal rule began in Rome—
after the destruction of Jerusalem—by a disciple of Jesus and
it is called small because it was small at the beginning. In
those days the emperor ruled over Rome and the Pope taught
only the Christians there. Therefore Daniel says among them
and not after them. This small horn survives the three earlier
beasts and their empires! The fifth empire is that of the king
Messiah—not of the Antichrist as the Christian interpreters,
who identify him with the small horn, would have it. This
period inaugurates the ultimate Redemption. This will not
be followed by an Exile, for from now on Israel, which will
not perish like the four empires, will serve God faithfully for
ever.\(^4\) Abravanel made ample use, too, of his knowledge of

\(^1\) Before basing an exposition of Abravanel's attitude to either of the two on
passages like 65a. r./l., 75b. r. or 39b. in his Comm. on Daniel, and 40a. r. in his
Comm. on Kings, I want to collect further evidence. For there is not only con-
stant confusion between Josephus and Josef ben Corion but a comparison
between both, Abravanel and the relevant passages in Chronicles, e.g., involves
text-critical problems as well.

\(^2\) Comm. on Dan., 42b. r. A similar statement (16a. r.) is made to prove
the identity of Rome and Edom, i.e. that Rome not only rules all nations politi-
cally but, through the Pope, also their beliefs.

\(^3\) Who identified the small horn with Constantine. Abravanel states the
impossibility by asserting that this was one of the greatest Roman emperors.
Abravanel was familiar with the history of Rome under the consuls and Caesars
before Christ and after and with the persecutions of the Christians (see loc. cit.,
43a. r./44a. r.).

\(^4\) Again Gersonides is censured with amazement that he identified the son
of man with the king Messiah and the Ancient of days with either the Roman
Senate or the Pope: This is mere fancy and the truth is that God alone is the agent
of Israel's Redemption.
Persian history, both before and after Alexander the Great, and of that of the Diadochoi. Thus he attacks Gersonides, who finds his explanation of the *he goat* in Alexander's illegitimate birth. Abravanel, thanks to his better knowledge of history, sees in that term a reference to the relative unimportance and insignificance of Macedonia in its early stages. A large part of this Commentary consists of a critical analysis of the views of his predecessors, both Jewish and Christian. Of special importance in this respect is Abraham bar Chiyya (1065-1136) whom he quotes frequently and to whom he is indebted, like his predecessors, for his astronomical or rather astrological knowledge. He does not hesitate to disagree with his source if his own judgment leads him to other conclusions. Yet he borrows completely bar Chiyya's conception and construction of Jewish history in accordance with the course of the planets and follows the parallelism between the periods of World history and the six days of Creation. The agreement between Scripture and astronomy, respecting the termination of the Exile, is clear evidence to Abravanel of the truth of Scripture, and of the right to use astronomy to this end. Turning to his criticism of the Christian exegesis given in special chapters Abravanel polemises in particular against Porphyry, who interpreted the *small horn* and other prophecies as pointing to Antiochos Epiphanes and the Maccabees. Nicholas of Lyra, counted first among the Christian commentators, is followed where he agrees with Jewish tradition and not with Latin, but Abravanel criticizes his chronology. He censures the Church's method of referring all good predictions to the Christians and all bad ones to the Jews. Paul of Burgos with his master Raimund di Martini are refuted and charged with an interpretation of the stories not according to their proper meaning but according to what they wanted them to mean.

Abravanel's own exposition must be reserved for a more...

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1. *Loc. cit.*, 41a. r. and 53a. r./54b. l.
3. *See n. 1 above*. Albo and others are likewise blamed for referring Daniel's visions to the second Temple.
4. *Comm. on Dan.*, 66a. r.; b. l.
5. *Loc. cit.*, 75a. r.
comprehensive treatment of the subject, but it is characteristic
and important for his thought that he counted Daniel among
the prophets. In opposition to Maimonides and other Jewish
authorities he proves that the visions bear all the criteria of true
prophecy. Thus Daniel—together with the other prophets—
supplied him with valuable additional proof for the future
Redemption. Taking the visions as predicting future events,
he could make the prophecy of the four empires the backbone
of his interpretation. The fall of the fourth, accompanied by
strange and terrible happenings, would illustrate one of the
pillars of the advent of the Messianic age, God’s vengeance upon
Israel’s enemies. Necessarily connected with that age is also
Resurrection.

He expresses a confident hope and firm belief in the approaching
salvation of his people and all the righteous on earth in these
words: the rod has blossomed, a staff has risen in Israel, the time
of the nightingale has come. A vine is before my eyes as if in
bloom. Therefore I say, our salvation has drawn near . . . and
even if many troubles meet us, they are the birthpangs of the
Messiah; this is a time of anguish for Jacob but there will be a
saviour and the kingdom will be unto God; His kingdom is an
everlasting kingdom and His rule from generation to generation.

Because he saw many despair of the coming of the Messiah he
wanted to prove it from the plain straightforward meaning of
Scripture. He addresses the Apikorsim in the first place, i.e.

1 Abravanel finds support for his view in the Seder ‘Olam (as well as in the
Christian Church). His proof occupies many pages (16b. l./20a. r. and pass.).
Most of the argument forms a refutation of Maimonides’ theory of prophecy.
Abravanel distinguishes between prophetic and natural dream and thus refutes
Maimonides’ view of a common source for prophecy and dream and shows that
Maimonides wrongly quotes Aristotle in favour of his view. Anticipating the
few remarks made on that question later on in this paper it must be noted that
Abravanel takes up this point again and again throughout his commentaries
(e.g. in defending Solomon against Maimonides who would deny him prophetic
visions, see Comm. on Kings, 11 1.). Abravanel takes the traditional, conserva-
tive view of the miraculous supranatural character of prophecy against the
psychological view of Maimonides who explains prophecy as a natural phenom-
enon (see Abravanel’s Comm. on More, II, chs. 32-7 in particular).

2 Following Maimonides who held that these passages were the clearest
of all in Scripture on Resurrection.

3 Mashmî’a y’shu‘ah, 2a. r./3a. 1.

4 Loc. cit., 83a. 1.
here those who disregarded with scorn and contempt the predictions of Scripture. He therefore collected only unmistakable evidence and left out the Hagiographa, the plain literal meaning of which did not necessarily yield Messianic material. Daniel is the most important of the 17 announcers of good tidings; Zechariah is the most convincing of the Minor Prophets, and from Isaiah he derives 14 principles by which he inquires into the prophecies of Redemption in all the prophets. The Pentateuch is naturally also included. Next to his primary aim, just discussed, Abravanel wishes to prove convincingly that none of these prophecies refer to the return from the first Exile, the building of the second Temple and the second Commonwealth, but clearly and exclusively to the final Redemption at the end of days. They can also not be interpreted in the way of the Christian commentators. He sets the concrete, literal meaning against the Christian claim that the real meaning is the spiritual Redemption, the salvation of the soul effected by Christ’s martyrdom and death. Abravanel insists on the actual Redemption in flesh as well as in spirit. (Therefore he stresses Divine vengeance, resurrection and ingathering of the exiles almost coinciding with it.) If the Christians referred the term Edom to the Children of Israel because of their sins, they overlooked the fact that immediately following the prediction of vengeance upon Edom is given consolation and comfort for Israel. Here we meet again Abravanel’s insistence on the unity of Scripture as a whole, including its single passages. Jesus, for him, is not the promised king Messiah of Davidic origin, nor has he fulfilled the prophecy that after the Redemption most of the nations will turn to the one true God, acknowledge and worship Him and study His Law. For history shows that only a part of the world—chiefly coerced by Constantine—embraced Christianity, whilst more than half of the inhabited Earth is in the hands of the Muslims. The disunion among the Jews in the Second Commonwealth excludes the reference of this prophecy to the Second Temple.  

1 Loc. cit., 30b. 1.
2 Loc. cit., 31b. r./l. He points out—in reference to Matthew i—that in the time of the second Temple husband and wife need no longer be of the same tribe as there was no longer a division of the land.
3 Loc. cit., 32a. r.
V.

Apart from the pedagogic and apologetic-polemic significance of these Messianic treatises, they throw light on the personality of their author and his attitude to Judaism. How is it possible, we may ask, that such an eminent statesman, such a successful political negotiator had no constructive policy in mind to better the lot of the Jews in his day? Why did he not try to organize a well-ordered exodus from Spain and keep the exiles together and settle them, or at least part of them, in Palestine or the neighbouring countries? Such an idea never entered his mind. A clue to the reason may be seen, perhaps, in Abravanel’s denial of the opinion of the sages that Daniel went up to Jerusalem.¹ His explanation is that Daniel did not wish to go to Jerusalem because the Exile was so long and Redemption so very far off. Zerubbabel also returned to Babel from Jerusalem, for which he constantly prayed as well as for Redemption. Exactly the same attitude we find with Abravanel. He was, as we have seen, so convinced of the approaching end of the Exile, and was so certain about God’s own deliverance by sending the promised Messiah, that the only thing for the Jews to do was to suffer patiently under foreign rule and oppression and to return to God before He would restore them to their own country. Suffering is God’s punishment for their sins. If they repent and reform their ways God in His infinite mercy will deliver them. For, and here we reach the ideological structure the practical outcome of which is this in the political sense passive attitude, Israel is guided by God’s particular Providence. God will never abandon His chosen people. He is the God of all the Earth and His Providence watches over all mankind, but only in a general way. Israel, He has chosen among all nations, not to grant her privileges but to serve His Supreme will, embodied in the Torah. If history is the manifestation of God’s will and rule, Israel’s history is the reaction to this Divine will. It is well with Israel when she obeys God; if she rebels by serving strange gods, He who by covenant has chosen her will also

¹ Based on Josippon, Book I, ch. iii, who lets Daniel die in Susan (see Commen Dan., 68a. r.).
punish her. But as Jacob is His first born son, He will again and again show mercy upon the repentant Israel. This idea is common to Judaism throughout the Middle Ages, based upon the prophets and the later sages. Abravanel seems to be indebted to Yehudah Hallewi's (1080-1141) Kusari for the shaping of his thought of God's particular Providence.¹ His wide though perhaps superficial knowledge of ancient history confirmed his belief in this Divine Providence, for he saw that the might of Rome, the beauty of Greece, the powers of Assyria, Babylonia and Persia had all flourished and perished. Israel alone among these ancient nations had survived, without political organization, without a land, scattered among the nations to testify—not least in her sufferings at their hands—to the will of God, to His might and glory, which will restore her in the days of the Messiah to her land.² In this way Abravanel interpreted his own times, like all Jewish thinkers who saw in the continuity of Jewish history the manifestation of a Divine plan and who attributed the Jews' suffering, in the first place, to their own shortcomings, and to the neglect of God's positive commandments. Hence his exposition of the Bible, hence his Messianism, which seems so theoretical because it is propounded with so much learning. Nations perished because they were guided by their own laws and customs (through which alone, to his mind, they are distinguished from each other). Israel survived because she still upheld Torath haShem, the Law of (the one) God. Every nation has its heavenly prince and star to guide its destinies, and heavenly bodies determine their movements and actions. But Israel is singled out, since her guide is God alone. The body of Israel is like that of all other nations, but in her soul she is distinct from them, for Israel stands under God, the other nations under the heavenly bodies although naturally with the consent and

¹ Loc. cit., 24b. r. Yehudah Hallewi and Abraham bar Chiyya must be considered as likely sources for Abravanel's conception of Jewish history in general.

² Abravanel is completely in accord with Maimonides, who at the end of the Hilkhoth m*lkhim in his Mishne Torah—quoted by him—describes the Messianic kingdom as a real earthly kingdom, invested with all the political power necessary to guarantee a reign of peace and justice for all mankind.
knowledge of God. They depend on the natural order, but Israel depends exclusively on God, who may, by His special Providence, do good or evil to Israel according as she deserves. In other words, God can hinder the action of this heavenly agent or can add to it at times. Israel is thus governed by a miraculous order superior to, and independent of, nature. Whether God annuls planetary constellations in the case of Israel depends on how she fulfils the Torah and its commandments. Abravanel cherished the same faith and belief as every Jew of his age. But whereas the masses did so in a naïve, none the less, strong and sincere, belief, strengthened by the hope of seeing with their own eyes the promised Redemption and thus being visibly recom-pensed for their sufferings, Abravanel had arrived by his study at an almost scientific corroboration and justification of that faith innate in every Jew. It was the same during the Crusades with the French and German Jewries.

VI.

No account of Abravanel would be complete without at least touching upon his attitude to Maimonides. In all questions of principle, of fundamental teachings in Judaism, Abravanel is indebted to Maimonides, even where he differs from him. Whenever Maimonides' views can be harmonized with the plain meaning of Scripture and with the sayings of the Talmudic sages, Abravanel follows the master, the great teacher. Only if this is impossible does he deviate from him. In his treatise Rosh Amanah Abravanel defends Maimonides' thirteen articles against Albo and Crescas (1340-1410), although he holds the reasonable view with regard to dogma that in the face of the equal importance of every precept of the Torah and of the equal authority of its teachings no precedence or preference should be given to particular principles. This attitude is well in accord with Abravanel's view of the unity of Scripture, repeatedly stated.

There are, however, three questions of particular importance in which he strongly opposes Maimonides: prophecy, the

1 Comm. on Dan., 83a. r. and esp. 88a. r./90b. r. See also n. 1, p. 473.
interpretation of the Creation story and that of Ezekiel's vision of the Heavenly Chariot. Abravanel holds that the vision of the Chariot has nothing to do with the natural or metaphysical sciences, as Maimonides and his followers claim, but it is, by its position of preceding the prophet's warning of punishment by Exile, part of that matter. The vision points to the same four world empires as Daniel's four beasts. Abravanel is convinced that Maimonides himself felt the difficulty of his explanation, but that he relied on his own mind and rational investigation. Instructive for Abravanel's attitude is his remark that he who is not convinced of the Creatio ex nihilo by (philosophical) proof should accept it by way of tradition from the prophets. There is no harm in this. In sharpest contrast to Maimonides is Abravanel's traditional view of prophecy and its origin. A few words at least must be said on this point. Maimonides sees in prophecy a natural phenomenon, open to every person endowed with perfect imagination and perfect intellect. God lets emanate the active intellect on to the rational and imaginative faculties alike and thus makes man a prophet. He differs from Alfarabi only in that God can withhold the gift of prophecy, especially if preparation for it is lacking in the person naturally destined for it. Abravanel dismisses the psychological explanation of prophecy and makes Cod the sole active force in endowing man with the gift of prophecy, contrary to Maimonides' negative power of withholding. By pointing to Amos, Abravanel denies that intellectual preparation is necessary. If prophecy were a natural phenomenon why is it only to be found in Israel and why were not the great philosophers, so perfect in virtues and thoughts, worthy of being prophets? He also makes due allowance for the miraculous element, as e.g. when he insists,

2 Loc. cit., 73b. to the end. Abravanel explains that Maimonides could not deal in his More with the principles of the Coming of the Messiah and the Resurrection as they belong to the category of Reward and Punishment and are thus included in the principle of Providence. As they are, moreover, derived from tradition (Qabbalah) they cannot be expounded by metaphysical investigation (Iyyun). For this reason Maimonides expounded them in his letters.
3 More, II, ch. 37.
4 Abravanel's Comm. to loc. cit., 79 ff.
against Maimonides and Nachmanides, on the whole nation having seen God at Sinai, listened to His voice and heard as well as understood all the Ten Commandments. He quotes Ibn Ezra in his support.¹

These few examples show that there is a divergence in principle which is partly at least due to the developments which took place in Judaism following upon Maimonides. In the deplorable fight between Maimunists and Antimaimunists Abravanel occupies a middle position. He admires the work of Maimonides and acknowledges his indebtedness to him on almost every page and refrains from decrying the pursuit of philosophy and secular sciences as the Antimaimunists did. But he does not consider philosophy, as rational speculation, an equal partner to the Torah and Rabbinic tradition. He makes use of a philosophical argument if it helps to support tradition, to bring out the real, plain meaning of Scripture. He does not belittle human reason, yet he does not allow it free play to get the upper hand. Maimonides assigned an important place to moral virtues and insisted on the performance of the Commandments as a means to moral perfection, but maintained that the highest good and ultimate happiness and perfection consisted in the true perception of God leading to an imitation of His ways, thus again resulting in action. He allowed Reason to interpret Scripture according to rational standards (sometimes clearly ruling out the original, literal meaning). Abravanel makes such a concession only in so far as Reason can support tradition, with Scripture as the unique basis. This is not the place to argue whether the observance of the Commandments is of equal importance with or even superior to a rational perception of God. But the statement that although the intellect and imagination of the prophet must be sound, it is his moral perfection and his freedom from the defects of his animal desires which make him fit for prophecy,² rather points in that direction. Abravanel likes to style himself

¹ See n. 1, p. 470, and n. 1, second half, p. 457.
² See n. 4, p. 475, 6th premise. This is directed against Muhammad, with his excessive lust. Is Abravanel here making a concession to Maimonides by admitting preparation, even if it be moral and not intellectual?
and those who sympathise with him in their interpretation of Scripture as the true representatives of Torah or as the community of the believers\(^1\) against the philosophers. He goes even so far as to despise those, like Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, Gersonides, etc., who tried to harmonize the words of the sages with the views of Aristotle and his disciples and their sophistry, for I know that the way of the sages of Israel in their wisdom received by tradition is as far removed from the ways of the philosophers in their speculations and thoughts as East is from West.\(^2\) Nevertheless he did not hesitate to accept individual interpretations of these very men he had so violently denounced—if they were in accord with tradition! He can say of Maimonides that his interpretation of prophecy is as far above his own—which agrees with tradition—as Heaven is above Earth,\(^3\) and accept with praises his interpretation of the meaning and character of the sacrifices.\(^4\) This is not lack of sincerity or truthfulness on his part, but rather the outcome of his empiric nature and of his search for truth where it may be found. It would be wrong to set off one statement against another contradictory one, for, seen in the whole of his work and of his personality, they form nevertheless a unity. For an unswerving faith and a sincere loyalty bind these seemingly divergent statements and moods together. The man who stands in the middle between those who merely accepted and handed on established tradition and those who claimed the right to examine tradition with autonomous human reason is by no means a mediocrity. A man of wide learning, he has incorporated in his mind the conflicting tendencies of his day. He is at home in tradition as well as in philosophy and history, and makes use of all his tools in a manner appropriate to the task of the moment. He is the last representative of the mediæval epoch and at the same time the first Jew to apply a scientific method to the interpretation of the teachings of Judaism. He is a moderate conservative eager to maintain the status quo in Judaism. To this end he not only sums up in a final form what previous generations but, taught in method and exposition, adds something of his own. Granted that

\(^1\) As note 2, p. 476.
\(^2\) *Y'shu'oth M'ushiḥo*, preface, 9b. l.
\(^3\) As note 2, p. 476.
\(^4\) Introd. to Comm. on *Leviticus*. 
Abravanel as a commentator is indebted to the exegesis prior to his day in many points of detail, even in method perhaps, there remains nevertheless an outstanding contribution to Biblical exegesis as a science. He was, indeed, the first to understand and practice exegesis as such. He tried to understand men and their intentions by making due allowance for their character, position and milieu. Systematic treatment, sound criticism of his predecessors, independent mastery of the accumulated knowledge, a scholarly enthusiasm to clear away doubts and to see and solve real difficulties, the desire to understand the Bible as a whole and to bring out the real meaning of its several books in their true historic setting, are qualities all peculiar to himself. This is mainly the result of his practical experience as a statesman and diplomat who witnessed important developments in Spanish and Jewish history. Knowledge thus gained he threw back to the past history of his people, which he saw, partly at least, in the light of the history of the world powers. The occasional references in the Bible saw in the world powers instruments of God’s will in His plans with Israel. In addition to that Abravanel learnt to understand and judge the nations by their own standards as he saw them through the chronicles of the Latins. With a great love for his people, whom he tried to serve all his life, especially by expounding to them their spiritual heritage, he combined the humanist’s admiration for the Classics and foreshadowed in important beginnings the scholarship of the Renaissance. All students of the Bible are thus indebted to him for his courageous attempt to apply a strictly scientific method to the interpretation of the Old Testament, to bring out its plain, clear meaning, and to realize and to solve its difficulties. Our difficulties in respect of the Bible are other and so are our methods of removing them, yet our approach should still be that of Abravanel: the will to understand and to live its message of beauty and truth, and to see in it a great record of what the right relations should be between man and God and man and his fellow.