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## ABARBANEL: COMMENTATOR AND TEACHER CELEBRATING 500 YEARS OF HIS INFLUENCE ON TANAKH STUDY

On the whole, [Abrabanel's] commentaries are not of the highest calibre, and his avoidance of philological and grammatical observations, together with his prolixity, greatly limit their exegetical worth  
(*Nabum M. Sarna*)<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that of Abravanel we may say as we do of Maimonides that though his methods may be obsolete yet his spirit and his system have permanent value  
(*Herbert Loewe*)<sup>2</sup>

As an exegete, especially of the purely historical books of the Bible, both in his methods and in the nature of his commentary [Abravanel] stands alone and without equal, and it is difficult to understand the latter-day neglect of him  
(*Louis Rabinowitz*)<sup>3</sup>

Few biblical commentaries have been accorded the acclaim and popularity enjoyed by Don Isaac Abarbanel's commentary on the Pentateuch  
(*Sid Z. Leiman*)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Hebrew and Bible Studies in Medieval Spain," in *The Sephardi Heritage*, vol. 1, ed. R.D. Barnett (New York: Ktav, 1971), pp. 357-358.

<sup>2</sup> "Isaac Abravanel and His Age," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, J.B. Trend & H. Loewe (eds.) (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1937), p. xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> "Abravanel as Exegete," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> "Abarbanel and the Censor," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (1968), p. 49. For an extensive list of traditional scholars influenced by Abarbanel, see Eric Lawee, "Isaac Abarbanel's Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship: A Retrospective and Opportunity," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III*, Isadore Twersky & Jay M. Harris (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 231.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The above-cited evaluations of the works of Don Yitshak Abarbanel<sup>5</sup> (1437-1508) demonstrate the strikingly different reactions to his commentaries. Is his work mediocre or of extraordinary value? Are his commentaries obsolete or relevant? Why do scholars arrive at such disparate views of Abarbanel's work?

The appreciation of Abarbanel's exegesis is impeded by at least three factors: 1) the widespread tendency to relativize his comments to his historical setting and personal life; 2) his balance of creativity and traditionalism; 3) the preference of some scholars for a "scientific" approach to Tanakh, grounded in philology and grammar. In this essay, we will consider salient examples of Abarbanel's work in light of what he was trying to achieve, and how he continues to influence contemporary Tanakh study.

## II. ABARBANEL'S HISTORICAL SETTING AND PERSONAL LIFE

A significant feature of *parshanut* scholarship is the inclination to relativize interpretation to historical context, i.e., to argue that a commentator's setting motivated him to read a text in a certain way.<sup>6</sup> This tendency is greatly exacerbated in Abarbanel scholarship since Abarbanel frequently refers to his historical setting and personal life. Consequently, several of Abarbanel's interpreters fail to recognize that his primary agenda is to explain *peshat* in biblical texts.

### A. Monarchy

If, after you have entered the land that the LORD your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, "I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me," you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman (Deut. 17:14-15).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For the preference of this spelling of Abarbanel's last name, see Sid Z. Leiman, "Abarbanel and the Censor," p. 49, n. 1. When citing writers who used other spellings I have retained their preferences.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "The Paradox of Parshanut: Are our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators, Review Essay of *Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*," Tradition 38:4 (Winter 2004), pp. 112-128.

<sup>7</sup> Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

Samuel was displeased that they said “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD replied to Samuel, “Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king. Like everything else they have done ever since I brought them out of Egypt to this day—forsaking Me and worshipping other gods—so they are doing to you.” (*I Sam.* 8:6-8).

The *tanna'im* debate whether the Torah commands monarchy or whether it simply permits it. R. Yehuda (*Sanhedrin* 20b) considers monarchy a positive commandment. R. Nehorai maintains that it is permitted yet frowned upon. In *Sifrei Devarim* 156, R. Nehorai asserts that monarchy is shameful for Israel, citing *I Samuel* 8:7, where God judges the people’s request a rejection of divine rule. R. Yehuda retorts that monarchy is a commandment, but that the people sinned by requesting a king inappropriately.

Rambam rules like R. Yehuda, that monarchy is a positive commandment (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1-2). Many commentators and codifiers adopted this position. Abarbanel,<sup>8</sup> however, dissents, and offers a thorough critique of Rambam’s view. God and Samuel were incensed at the people’s very asking for a king, rather than the specific formulation or timing of their request.<sup>9</sup> If the Torah commands monarchy, why did Joshua and his successors fail to appoint a king? When Samuel rebuked the people, why did they not respond that they wanted to fulfill a Torah commandment?

Abarbanel adopts R. Nehorai’s view that while monarchy is permitted if requested, it is negative. Abarbanel likens monarchy to the laws of the “beautiful captive” (Deut. 21:10-14), another case where the Torah permits certain less-than-ideal actions in order to forestall worse eventualities. He invokes the talmudic principle, “the Torah states this in consideration of the evil inclination” (*Kiddushin* 21b). Abarbanel further observes that biblical history corroborates his hypothesis. Joshua, the judges, and Samuel successfully guided their nation religiously, while many kings caused more religious harm than good. Abarbanel’s excursus on monarchy is an outstanding specimen of his approach to Tanakh. He

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy, 163-171; *Samuel*, 202-209. References to Abarbanel’s commentaries on Tanakh refer to the pages in the Commentaries on the Torah (3 vols. Jerusalem: Benei Arabel, 1964); Commentaries on the Former Prophets (Jerusalem: Torah va-Da’at, 1955); Commentaries on *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel* (Jerusalem: Benei Arabel, 1979); Commentaries on the *Twelve Prophets* (Tel-Aviv: Sefarim Abarbanel, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *I Sam.* 10:19; 12:17.

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considers each facet of the textual evidence, methodically evaluates the opinions of his predecessors, and advances a comprehensive hypothesis he believes best addresses all the questions.

Some scholars, however, have been sidetracked by Abarbanel's historical setting, and by his rebuttal of Aristotle's claim that all nations need monarchy to govern them. They posit that Abarbanel opposed monarchy because of his negative experiences with monarchy and his favorable view of republics.<sup>10</sup> For that matter, some relativize the views of Rambam and his followers, as well. For example, Aviezer Ravitsky suggests that Ran, who shared Rambam's positive view of monarchy, lived in a time of Jewish prosperity; while Abarbanel was adversely affected by the vicious Spanish monarchy of his day.<sup>11</sup>

These arguments suffer from a fundamental methodological flaw: Jewish life in medieval Spain notwithstanding, the Torah has to mean *something*. The unusual legal formulation in Deuteronomy and God's frustration at the people's request for a king in *Samuel* need to be explained. Long before the medieval debate, Hazal already were divided over this issue.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that Abarbanel's experiences informed his teachings on the monarchy. However, that does not necessarily mean that this is what *caused* him to explain the texts in the manner he did. It is just as reasonable to maintain that once Abarbanel reached his conclusions based on text analysis, he then buttressed his opinion in rational and historical terms. Perhaps his government experience even gave him an interpretive advantage over his rabbinic predecessors for understanding biblical political theory.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Yitshak Baer, "Don Yitshak Abarbanel and His Relationship to Problems of History and Politics" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 8 (1937), pp. 241-259; David Polish, "Some Medieval Thinkers on the Jewish King," *Judaism* 20 (1971), pp. 323-329. Ephraim E. Urbach ("The State in the Eyes of Don Isaac Abarbanel" [Hebrew], in *Mehkarim be-Mada'ei Yehadut*, vol. 1, Moshe D. Her & Yonah Frankel [eds.] [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998], pp. 462-469) presents a more balanced approach by developing Abarbanel's text analysis first before asserting that the Bible alone cannot fully explain Abarbanel's strong political opposition to the institution of monarchy.

<sup>11</sup> "Kings and Laws in Late Medieval Jewish Thought: Nissim of Gerona vs. Isaac Abrabanel," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. Leo Landman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990), pp. 67-90.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald J. Blidstein ("The Monarchic Imperative in Rabbinic Perspective," *AJS Review* 7-8 [1982-1983], pp. 15-39) suggests that the tannaitic debate was sparked by rabbinic understandings of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. He admits, though, that his discussion is speculative.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Louis Rabinowitz: "But perhaps the greatest excellence of his commentary is the direct result of the exalted positions which he held in the service of the various courts. All previous commentators had been too far removed from worldly events to

Abarbanel had sound rabbinic precedents for his position. Aside from R. Nehorai's talmudic opinion, R. Sa'adya Gaon, Ibn Ezra, and R. Meyuhas (12<sup>th</sup> century Greece) also argued that the Torah does not command the establishment of a monarchy. Thus, the argument that Abarbanel's assessment of monarchy derived from his experiences in late 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain is beside the point.<sup>14</sup> The textual evidence convinced interpreters centuries before him and centuries after him, as well.<sup>15</sup>

In evaluating the comments of the *mefarshim*, one always must begin by searching for text motivations. It is reasonable that Abarbanel and other commentators believed that good *peshat* also contributed to the religious and educational needs of their time. Only in cases where a *pashtan* does violence to the text, or when consistent exegetical patterns can be demonstrated should one look elsewhere for possible motivations, and these must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Stated differently, there certainly is a correlation between Abarbanel's interpretation and historical setting in this instance—one that Abarbanel made explicit—but not necessarily a causal relationship where his historical setting actually distorted fair text interpretation.

### B. Messianism<sup>16</sup>

When [Abarbanel] composed [his commentary on *Isaiah*] in 1498, he was entirely predisposed to messianic influence...which was pronounced

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enable them to possess a proper evaluation and estimate of the historical and social background of Scripture" ("Abravanel as Exegete," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, p. 82).

<sup>14</sup> It also is noteworthy that not all Abarbanel's experiences with kings were bad. He writes glowingly of Alfonso V of Portugal, under whom he served (*Joshua*, 2).

<sup>15</sup> R. Meyuhas also likened monarchy to the "beautiful captive" as concessions to the evil inclination. See Gerald Blidstein, *Political Principles in Rambam's Thought* (Hebrew), second expanded edition (Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001), pp. 21-25, for a fuller survey of opinions of Hazal, Geonim, and Rishonim. See Gerald Blidstein, "Halakha and Democracy," *Tradition* 32:1 (Fall 1997), pp. 11-12 for a roster of 20th century thinkers who agree that monarchy is not mandatory. For other critiques of the over-relativizing of Abarbanel's view of the monarchy, see, David Polish, "Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509)," in *Gevuroth Haromah: Jewish Studies Offered at the Eightieth Birthday of Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler*, ed. Ze'ev W. Falk (Jerusalem: Mesharim Publishers, 1987), pp. xxxiii-lxv; Reuven Kimmelman, "Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos," in *Commandment and Community: New Essays in Jewish Legal and Political Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank (NY: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 195-216.

<sup>16</sup> For a review of the current state of scholarship on this issue, see Eric Lawee, "The Messianism of Isaac Abarbanel, 'Father of the (Jewish) Messianic Movements of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,'" in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture, Volume I: Jewish Messianism in the Early Modern World*, Matt D. Goldish & Richard H. Popkin (eds.) (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publications, 2001), pp. 1-39.

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at the end of his life, greatly weakening his critical sense (Meyer Waxman).<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after the Expulsion, Abarbanel composed his messianic trilogy: *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'a*, a commentary on *Daniel*; *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, an explanation of rabbinic statements about the Messiah; and *Mashmia Yeshu'a*, a commentary on the messianic prophecies in the Prophets and *Psalms* that he later incorporated into his commentaries to the Prophets. Together, they comprise the largest corpus of messianic thought ever produced by a Jewish author.<sup>18</sup>

Given the despair of Spanish Jewry after the Expulsion, there is little wonder that Abarbanel devoted record-setting attention to messianism. However, there are several reasons to exercise caution before concluding that Abarbanel lost his critical sense as a result of a post-Expulsion messianic bias. First, Eric Lawee observes that Abarbanel's *Kings* commentary, written immediately following the Expulsion, begins and ends with stirring accounts of events surrounding the Expulsion. The body of that commentary, however, reads like a natural continuation of the commentaries on *Joshua*, *Judges*, and *Samuel* Abarbanel composed in Spain in 1483. Similarly, messianic thought is almost entirely absent from Abarbanel's commentary on the Torah, which he wrote at the end of his life. Lawee concludes, "While, then, much ink has been spilled now for decades on Abarbanel's messianism, no one has explained—or, it would seem, barely even stopped to notice—the near-total absence of messianic concerns in the works of his last half-decade of life, including his monumental Torah commentaries."<sup>19</sup>

We may add that Abarbanel's messianic interpretations generally have precedent in earlier *parshanut*, militating against the argument that Abarbanel's post-Expulsion setting is what caused him to interpret certain prophecies as messianic. In his commentary on *Isaiah* 11, for example, Abarbanel enumerates ten predictions of that chapter. He repeatedly notes that most of these predictions were not fulfilled in Hezekiah's time

<sup>17</sup> "Don Yitshak Abarbanel" (Hebrew), *The American Jewish Year Book* 3 (1938), p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Lawee, "The Messianism of Isaac Abarbanel," p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> "The Messianism of Isaac Abarbanel," pp. 9-12. For a demonstration that Abarbanel's post-Expulsion writings generally have antecedents in his thought while still in Portugal (and therefore should not casually be attributed to post-Expulsion circumstances), see Eric Lawee, "Yitshak Abarbanel's Intellectual Biography in Light of His Portuguese Writings" (Hebrew), forthcoming in *Yahadut Portugal be-Mifneh ha-Idan be-Hadash*, ed. Yom-Tov Assis (Jerusalem: Dinur Center, in press). I am grateful to Professor Lawee for showing me a copy of this article.

or in the Second Temple period. The prophecy, therefore, must refer to the messianic age.<sup>20</sup> Abarbanel was preceded in this messianic reading by a number of commentators, including: Rashi, Kara, Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and R. Yeshaya D'Trani. Others, including R. Moshe ibn Gikatila, R. Yosef ibn Caspi, and a hesitant Ibn Ezra, maintained that the context of this chapter indicates that Hezekiah is the intended subject of the prophecy. The utopian predictions therefore must be understood as poetic exaggeration, or as events that occurred but were not recorded in Tanakh.

One might safely attribute Abarbanel's caustic tone toward such attempts to historicize such prophecies—e.g., referring to them as “heretical”<sup>21</sup>—to his context of giving encouragement to despairing Iberian Jewish exiles and deflating Christological interpretations.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Abarbanel's acceptance of the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 39b) that identifies the prophet Obadiah with Ahab's attendant as a received tradition may be readily associated with his theological agenda to identify Edom with Rome-Christianity. By doing so, he attempted to refute Ibn Gikatila and Ibn Ezra who maintained that Edom refers to the biblical nation southeast of Israel.<sup>23</sup> However, the interpretations he advances on the passages in question represent well-established positions in medieval *parshanut*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Isaiah*, 89-94.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., when he explains *Joel* 3-4 as messianic and expresses outrage at Ibn Gikatila and Ibn Ezra for arguing that these prophecies were fulfilled in the time of Jehoshaphat (*Joel*, 71-72). See further discussion in Avraham Lipshitz, “The Exegetical Approaches of R. Avraham ibn Ezra and R. Yitzhak Abarbanel Regarding Future Prophecies” (Hebrew), *The Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1973), vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Organization of Jewish Studies, 1977), pp. 133-139.

<sup>22</sup> See further discussion in Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (NY: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 127-134.

<sup>23</sup> *Obadiah*, 111. Eric Lawee observes that when Abarbanel avers that a Midrash reflects a received tradition rooted in prophetic authority, there likely is a sensitive theological argument nearby (*Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 104). For discussions of the origins of the Edom-Rome-Christianity link in Jewish literature, see Gerson Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 19-48; Yair Hoffmann, “Edom as a Symbol of Wickedness in Prophetic Literature” (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra ve-Toledot Yisrael* (Festschrift Yaakov Liver), ed. Binyamin Uffenheimer (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 1972), pp. 76-89; Solomon Zeitlin, “The Origin of the Term Edom for Rome and the Roman Church,” *JQR* 60 (1970), pp. 262-263.

<sup>24</sup> See Malbim's contribution to this discussion on *Isa.* 11:1. For further analysis of his view, see Hayyim Angel, “Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1-12 in Context,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1, pp. 3-10.

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Thus, the relativizing of Abarbanel's commentaries has caused damage in at least two ways. First, this approach misrepresents Abarbanel, who rightly casts himself as a *pashtan*.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, those who are quick to suggest that non-textual factors are what triggered Abarbanel's interpretations frequently overlook the textual arguments in his discussions.

By having his interpretations overly relativized, Abarbanel's works are branded as being exegetically obsolete, having only biographical and historical significance. Moshe Z. Segal's assessment epitomizes this misunderstanding: "Abarbanel approached Tanakh from a subjective vantage point, which evaluates verses not from the outlook of the authors of Tanakh, but rather from the outlook of the interpreter. Such explanations necessarily vanish from the world along with the fleeting outlook of the interpreter."<sup>26</sup>

It is symptomatic of much of the scholarship regarding Abarbanel that the title of Benzion Netanyahu's outstanding biography<sup>27</sup> defines Abarbanel as a "Statesman and Philosopher," rather than as a commentator and teacher of Tanakh (as well as *Pirkei Avot*, the *Haggada*, and Rambam's *Guide*<sup>28</sup>).<sup>29</sup> In contrast, one who reads Abarbanel as a commentator and teacher immediately recognizes the enduring value of his analyses and methodology in Tanakh study.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eric Lawee (*Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 254 n. 13), who criticizes scholars who fail to recognize Abarbanel as a *pashtan*.

<sup>26</sup> "R. Yitshak Abarbanel as a Biblical Exegete" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 8 (1937), p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman & Philosopher* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, first edition 1953).

<sup>28</sup> For a review of the current state of scholarship on Abarbanel's relationship to Rambam's teachings, see Eric Lawee, "The Good We Accept and the Bad We do Not': Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Maimonides," in *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 119-160.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, Abarbanel also was a statesman and philosopher. In addition to the growing body of scholarship on Abarbanel's exegetical work, it is encouraging to see the increased attention to Abarbanel's philosophical teachings. See recently Alfredo F. Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil: The Tension between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith* (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). See also the review of these two books and Eric Lawee's *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition* by James T. Robinson, "Review Essay: Three Recent Books on Isaac Abarbanel/Abravanel (1437-1508/9)," *AJS Review* 28 (2004), pp. 341-349. Several books and monographs by Menachem Kellner also give Abarbanel's philosophical teachings abundant coverage.

*C. Echoes of Abarbanel in his Understanding of Prophecy*

The Masoretic text does not arrange the biblical books as prescribed in *Bava Batra* 14b: *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel*, and then *Isaiah*. Instead, the Masoretic order is arranged *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, and then *Ezekiel*. Abarbanel advances five reasons why he prefers the Masoretic ordering: 1. The Masoretic text preserves the chronological order of the books; 2. *Isaiah* is first because its prophet was born into the royal family<sup>30</sup> and received a superior education, thus explaining his beautiful writing style and courage to criticize kings; 3. Isaiah was the greatest prophet other than Moses, as suggested by several Midrashim<sup>31</sup>; 4. *Isaiah* contains more prophecies of comfort and more aspects of redemption than any other prophetic book; 5. *Isaiah* contains more principles on the attainment of afterlife than any other prophetic book.<sup>32</sup>

Through this analysis, Abarbanel seems to identify himself as the quintessential student of Isaiah. He was raised in a noble family descended from King David, worked with royalty, prided himself on his writing style, and placed great emphasis on messianic redemption and religious teachings. As Eric Lawee observes, “as elsewhere in Abarbanel’s commentaries, autobiographical reverberations are readily discerned.”<sup>33</sup>

Another echo of Abarbanel’s personality may be reflected in his analysis of shared formulations by the prophets. *Isaiah* 2:2-4 is nearly identical to *Micah* 4:1-4; and the same is true for *Jeremiah* 49:7-17 and *Obadiah* 1:1-8. Abarbanel explains that in such cases both prophets received similar visions. The earlier prophet articulated the vision, and the later prophet borrowed his predecessor’s formulation. There always were

<sup>30</sup> Following the midrashic tradition that Isaiah’s father Amots and King Amaziah were brothers (e.g., *Megilla* 10b).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., *Deut. Rabba* 2:4; *Midrash Tehillim* 90:4.

<sup>32</sup> *Isaiah*, 3-12. Much has been written on Abarbanel’s introductions to the biblical books. See especially Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance toward Tradition*, pp. 169-186; and Eric Lawee, “Don Isaac Abarbanel: Who Wrote the Books of the Bible?” *Tradition* 30:2 (Winter 1996), pp. 65-73. For a survey and analysis of the antecedents of Abarbanel’s style of critical introduction, see Eric Lawee, “Introducing Scripture: The *Accessus ad auctores* in Hebrew Exegetical Literature from the Thirteenth through the Fifteenth Centuries,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish & Joseph W. Greenberg (eds.) (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 157-179. For a study of the historical-autobiographical material in Abarbanel’s introductions, see Cedric Cohen Skalli, “Discovering Isaac Abravanel’s Humanistic Rhetoric,” *JQR* 97 (2007), pp. 67-99.

<sup>33</sup> *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 49.

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variations between the two, “or else [the later prophet] would be a plagiarist.”<sup>34</sup>

That analysis may shed light on the issue of Abarbanel’s own “unacknowledged borrowings”. Already in Abarbanel’s time, R. Meir Arama charged that Abarbanel plagiarized his father R. Yitshak Arama (*Akedat Yitshak*). Writing from the perspective of his father, he wrote that Abarbanel “composed works and authored compilations...that he called original, sweet, profound, and subtle but the words were mine.”<sup>35</sup> In a recent article, Yair Hass defends Abarbanel against this accusation. Abarbanel had an exceptional memory, loved R. Yitshak Arama’s style, and did not co-opt excerpts verbatim.<sup>36</sup> Eric Lawee also notes that plagiarism did not carry the stigma it does today.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Abarbanel defends the practice of borrowing ideas without attribution: “even though authors of books will learn and take comments from their predecessors as though they are plagiarists, there is nothing shameful in their gathering wisdom, as all emanates from one Shepherd, i.e., God.”<sup>38</sup>

### III. ABARBANEL’S CREATIVITY AND TRADITIONALISM

As already noted, Don Yitshak Abarbanel was not an original thinker (Meyer Waxman).<sup>39</sup>

Abravanel prides himself upon his originality, and it is a pride for which a study of his works provides a complete justification (Louis Rabinowitz).<sup>40</sup>

Given the staggering breadth of Abarbanel’s reading, there is little wonder that many of his interpretations find precedent in earlier writings. At the same time, Abarbanel’s penetrating questions, literary observations, and psychological insights contribute meaningfully to Tanakh study. Even when he fails to persuade, he succeeds in forcing the reader to re-evaluate the textual evidence. In controversial matters, Abarbanel preferred to find rabbinic precedent to bolster his claims. In specifically textual discussions, Abarbanel

<sup>34</sup> *Obadiab*, 112; cf. *Isaiab*, 26; *Micab*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Translation in Eric Lawee, “Isaac Abarbanel’s Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship,” p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> “Regarding the Problem of the Occurrence of the Words of R. Yitshak Arama in the Writings of R. Yitshak Abarbanel” (Hebrew), *Sinai* 134 (2005), pp. 154-159.

<sup>37</sup> “Isaac Abarbanel’s Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship,” pp. 227-229.

<sup>38</sup> *Jeremiah*, 297. Abarbanel is expounding on *Ecc.* 12:11-12.

<sup>39</sup> “Don Yitshak Abarbanel,” p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> “Abravanel as Exegete,” in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, p. 80.

was remarkably creative, particularly with his style of asking questions<sup>41</sup> and his straddling the boundaries of *peshat* and *derash* to answer them.

A. *Judging Biblical Heroes Favorably*

[Better to] judge the prophets and wise men favorably...as the divine Torah commanded and the rabbinic sages instructed...as Maimonides wrote in the introduction to his book [the *Guide*] (Abarbanel).<sup>42</sup>

Eric Lawee lists Abarbanel's critique of David first among Abarbanel's most "surprising" and "untraditional" claims.<sup>43</sup> According to Abarbanel, David committed five sins: the act of adultery with Bathsheba; he was prepared to abandon his biological child by asking Uriah to return to Bathsheba; he had Uriah—a most loyal subject—killed; he had Uriah killed specifically by enemies; he insensitively married Bathsheba soon after Uriah's demise.

Following his assessment, Abarbanel cites the celebrated Gemara, "whoever says that David sinned is merely erring" (*Shabbat* 56a). However, retorts Abarbanel, the textual proofs adduced in David's defense are unconvincing, whereas Nathan explicitly accuses David of sinning and David confesses and repents. Moreover, Rav, the leading disciple of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi (=Rabbi), dismisses his teacher's defense of David on the spot: "Rabbi, who is descended from David, seeks to defend him, and expounds [the verse] in David's favor." Therefore, "these words of our Sages are the ways of *derash* and I have no need to respond to them... I prefer to say that [David] sinned greatly and confessed greatly and repented fully and accepted his punishment and in this manner he attained atonement for his sins."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For a survey and analysis of the antecedents of Abarbanel's method of asking a series of questions and then answering them, see Marc Saperstein, "The Method of Doubts: Problematizing the Bible in Late Medieval Jewish Exegesis," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish & Joseph W. Greenberg (eds.) (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 133-156. Eric Lawee considers the length and involved nature of Abarbanel's questions as having achieved a new level beyond that of his predecessors. See his "Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Vol. 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment (1300-1800)*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 190-214.

<sup>42</sup> *Ateret Zekeinim*, 2 (translation in Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 62).

<sup>43</sup> *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Samuel*, 342-343.

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Eric Lawee praises Abarbanel's interpretive independence: "Abarbanel could all at once criticize the conduct of a divinely appointed biblical hero, reject a midrashic absolution of him, and depart from medieval readings grounded in this rabbinic exculpation." Further, "Abarbanel's critique of King David breaks with rabbinic and medieval Jewish tradition."<sup>45</sup> However, one modification must be introduced to Lawee's stark formulations. Though Abarbanel does present himself as an independent *pashtan* in this instance, he has not broken with rabbinic tradition. A number of rabbinic sources do not exonerate David. For example, there are opinions that Bathsheba was possibly a married woman or certainly a married woman<sup>46</sup>; that David was guilty of statutory rape of a married woman<sup>47</sup>; that David was guilty for the death of Uriah<sup>48</sup>; that Joab bears guilt for failing to defy David's immoral orders regarding Uriah.<sup>49</sup> However, the unambiguous text evidence against David, including his own admission of guilt and wholehearted repentance, seems to have convinced Abarbanel that it was unnecessary to cite additional sources beyond Rav's dismissal of his teacher's defense of David.<sup>50</sup>

Abarbanel's responses to the other biblical figures defended in *Shabbat* 55b-56b illustrate his willingness to find fault with them when the biblical evidence is unambiguous, though he prefers to find rabbinic precedents to bolster his critiques. When there are even minor textual irregularities, he adopts the more conservative position that judges biblical characters favorably.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 119; p. 261, n. 140.

<sup>46</sup> *Bava Metsia* 59a; *Sanhedrin* 107a.

<sup>47</sup> *Ketuvot* 9a.

<sup>48</sup> *Yoma* 22b; *Kiddushin* 43a.

<sup>49</sup> *Sanhedrin* 49a.

<sup>50</sup> Abarbanel was not the first medieval interpreter to assert David's guilt, either. R. Yehuda bar Natan (Rashi's son-in-law, in *Teshuvot Hakhmei Provencia*, vol. 1 #71), R. Yeshaya D'Trani (on *Psa.* 51:1; but see his remarks on *II Sam.* 12:4, where he adopts the view in *Shabbat* 56a that Uriah had given Bathsheba a *get*), and Ibn Caspi (on *II Sam.* 11:6) preceded him. For a survey of rabbinic sources, see R. Yaakov Medan, *David and Bathsheba* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), especially pp. 7-26. I have not seen anyone address one anomaly in Abarbanel's assessment of the Bathsheba episode: In his commentary to *I Kings* 15:5, "David had done what was pleasing to the LORD and never turned throughout his life from all that He had commanded him, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite," Abarbanel (*Kings*, 568) explains that "the matter of Uriah" indicates that the Bathsheba affair was not considered a sin, since Bathsheba "was predestined for David from the six days of Creation, but that she came to him with sorrow" (*Sanhedrin* 107a).

<sup>51</sup> It is noteworthy that Abarbanel's first work, *Ateret Zekenim*, was dedicated to defending the elders in Exodus 24. By adopting this conservative approach, Abarbanel established his interpretive independence from Midrashim and earlier medieval

Abarbanel remains undecided whether Reuben really “lay with Bilhah” (*Gen.* 35:22), since Jacob did not expel Reuben from the family.<sup>52</sup> However, says Abarbanel, Eli’s sons did literally “lay with the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (*I Sam.* 2:22), and Samuel’s sons indeed “accepted bribes, and subverted justice” (*I Sam.* 8:3), since both texts are unambiguous. In both instances, Abarbanel cites rabbinic precedents.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, Abarbanel maintains that Solomon was not guilty of actual idol worship.<sup>54</sup> Dissatisfied with the talmudic defense, however, Abarbanel works harder than his predecessors at identifying further potential text ambiguities:

At that time, Solomon built a shrine for Hemosh the abomination of Moab on the hill near Jerusalem, and one for Molekh the abomination of the Ammonites. And he did the same for all his foreign wives who offered and sacrificed to their gods (*I Kings* 11:7-8).

For they have forsaken Me; they have worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Phoenicians, Hemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites; they have not walked in My ways, or done what is pleasing to Me, or [kept] My laws and rules, as his father David did (*I Kings* 11:33).

Why would vv. 7-8 stress that Solomon built shrines for his wives instead of highlighting the greater crime of worshipping idols himself? Additionally, v. 33 focuses on the nation, not Solomon. While not a compelling case by any means, these texts coupled with the talmudic arguments sufficed for Abarbanel to conclude that a reasonable doubt exists.<sup>55</sup>

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commentators who had been critical of those elders. See discussion in Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition*, pp. 59-82.

<sup>52</sup> Genesis, 357. Radak and Bekhor Shor maintain that Reuben perpetrated the act with Bilhah as literally described.

<sup>53</sup> Regarding Eli’s sons, Abarbanel quotes *Yoma* 9a in support of his position (*Samuel*, 180), though the continuation of that Gemara (9b) remains consistent with the passage in *Shabbat* 55b. *Midrash Shoher Tov* 53:1, Rashi, and Radak accept the literal reading of the biblical passage. Regarding Samuel’s sons, Abarbanel states “and a few of our Sages agreed” without citing sources (*Samuel*, 202) (again, Radak preceded Abarbanel).

<sup>54</sup> *Kings*, 545-550.

<sup>55</sup> For discussion of Abarbanel’s view of Solomon in the context of medieval thought, see David Berger, “‘The Wisest of All Men’: Solomon’s Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings,” in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Yaakov Elman & Jeffrey S. Gurock eds. (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 93-114.

### B. *The Waters of Meribah*

Numbers 20 is famously cryptic as to the nature of the sin that prevented Moses and Aaron from entering the Promised Land. Several commentators also express concern that so small a sin—whatever it was—resulted in so great a punishment. Abarbanel<sup>56</sup> systematically critiques ten views of his predecessors, concluding, “you have now seen with your eyes all the opinions and how far from the truth they are. Now your heart will be drawn to my view.”

Abarbanel proceeds to unfold a revolutionary hypothesis: Moses was barred from Israel because of his role in the Spies episode, and Aaron for his role in the Golden Calf episode. Both had noble intentions, but each unwittingly bore responsibility for the nation’s two greatest failures in the desert. Moses erred by adding a military agenda to the spies’ mission, thereby requiring them to report on those findings. This report is what led to the demoralization of the nation. While Aaron had pure intentions in building the Calf, he facilitated the nation’s failure, as well. To protect the honor of Moses and Aaron and to dissociate them from these disasters, the Torah covers up their errors by attributing their non-entry to Israel to a trivial matter: they struck a rock instead of speaking to it.

To support his novel hypothesis,<sup>57</sup> Abarbanel adduces twelve proofs. Several are unconvincing, e.g., Aaron died before Moses because the sin of the Calf preceded the sin of the Spies. Others, however, are textually grounded, even if alternative interpretations exist. When recounting the Spies episode in Deuteronomy, Moses included himself in the decree: “Because of you the LORD was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it either” (Deut. 1:37). Additionally, in the original decree, God says, “not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun” (Num.

<sup>56</sup> Numbers, 100-105; Deuteronomy, 21-26.

<sup>57</sup> Avraham Gross (“R. Yosef Hayyun and R. Yitshak Abarbanel: Intellectual Relationships” [Hebrew], *Mikhael* 11 [1989], p. 29), states that Hayyun—Abarbanel’s probable teacher in Lisbon—similarly proposed that Moses may have been barred from entering Israel as a result of the Spies episode. Gross suggests that either commentator could have learned the idea from the other, or perhaps it was an idea current in learned circles in Lisbon at that time. Regardless, Hayyun accepts that they were precluded from entering Israel because of their sin at the Waters of Meribah. For the full text of Hayyun’s monograph, see Avraham Gross, *R. Yosef b. Avraham Hayyun: Leader of the Lisbon Community and His Works* (Hebrew) (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), pp. 216-230. Eric Lawee (*Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 31) believes that Abarbanel wrote a longer monograph while still in Portugal. Abarbanel refers to this earlier monograph, stating that his commentary is a synopsis of that earlier work (Deuteronomy, 23).

14:30). Moses and Aaron were not mentioned, since Aaron already was excluded because of the Calf and Moses because of the Spies.

Marshaling rabbinic precedent for the idea of a cover-up by the Torah, Abarbanel cites *midrashim* that ascribe the deaths of Nadab and Abihu to a number of causes other than the Torah's explicit reference to their bringing an alien fire. Thus, Hazal also were willing to accept the notion that the Torah does not always fully disclose the true reasons for a punishment.

Abarbanel then confronts the Torah's refrain that Moses and Aaron did not enter the Land as a result of the Waters of Meribah episode (Num. 20:23-24; 27:13-14; Deut. 32:50-51). He strains mightily to reinterpret these verses, yet emerges completely persuaded by his interpretation: "This is what I wanted to say on this matter, and I believe that it is the entire truth."

Abarbanel may fail to convince in this instance, but he has elucidated every major and minor issue that needs to be considered. He provides a model lesson on how to evaluate opinions methodically in light of the text evidence. Moreover, his discussion pertains to Deuteronomy and its relationship to the other books of the Torah, a favorite subject in Abarbanel's repertoire.<sup>58</sup> Though we may not arrive at a satisfying solution, Abarbanel has given us a full appreciation of the magnitude of the question and its underlying issues.

### C. Between Strict Peshat and Strict Derash: Literary Readings

It is evil and bitter to me that Rashi was content in interpreting most of Scripture based on what the Sages expounded. And R. Avraham ibn Ezra [was content in explaining] grammar and the surface meaning, and consequently his commentaries are shorter than the actual verses (Abarbanel).<sup>59</sup>

A prominent feature of Abarbanel's commentaries is his exploration of the vast field between strict *peshat* and non-textual *derash*. Abarbanel exploits literary elements in the text and applies psychological insights to bind the broader narratives together.

<sup>58</sup> See further in Yaakov Elman, "The Book of Deuteronomy as Revelation: Nahmanides and Abarbanel," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Yaakov Elman & Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.) (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 229-250.

<sup>59</sup> *Joshua*, 13.

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Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, “Let me go back to my kinsmen in Egypt and see how they are faring.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.” The LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead” (Exodus 4:18-19).

Moses already had told God he would go to Egypt. Now that he had received his father-in-law’s permission, why would God command him again? Abarbanel suggests that Jethro’s response, “go in peace,” contains considerable meaning beyond simple permission. Jethro remembered that before Moses had arrived in Midian, he was involved in killing an Egyptian and then meddling in an Israelite scuffle. Jethro feared that Moses, upon his return, would encounter his old adversaries and get dragged into further confrontations. Therefore, Jethro subtly hinted to Moses: “go in peace”, i.e., do not get into trouble as you did last time. Already insecure about returning to Egypt, Moses was demoralized by Jethro’s subtle allusion to past setbacks. God therefore commanded him to go again, and told him that he was safe from his past enemies. Through a text redundancy, Abarbanel employs a psychological twist to highlight Moses’ insecurities.<sup>60</sup>

Abarbanel combines psychology and his keen understanding of politics to explain God’s choosing Aaron to bring the first three plagues and then Moses for the remaining seven. God wanted to protect Moses’ honor. Knowing that the magicians would challenge the first three plagues by attempting to replicate them, God commanded Aaron to bring those plagues so that Moses’ authority would not be opposed directly. Only after the magicians conceded defeat did God transfer the responsibility to Moses.<sup>61</sup>

Through these and so many related readings, Abarbanel offers interpretations that straddle the boundaries of *peshat* and *derash*. His creative insights are triggered by genuine text issues, though many would not pass muster in the realm of strict philological *peshat*.

## IV. CONCLUSION: IN PRAISE OF ABARBANEL’S PROLIXITY

[Abarbanel] did not recognize the spirit of his reader for whom he composed...These characteristics, which so make it greatly burdensome for us to learn his works and which drive away readers, served the opposite

<sup>60</sup> Exodus, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Exodus, 68.

purpose to win the hearts of those who heard his words orally in his lectures (Moshe Z. Segal).<sup>62</sup>

[Brevity] demonstrates deficient comprehension of the verses; do they not realize that there are seventy faces to the Torah?... Not so with me! In places where it is valuable to be lengthy I am not permitted to write briefly (Abarbanel).<sup>63</sup>

While some have judged Abarbanel's writings to be overly wordy, Abarbanel prided himself on his style. Joseph Sarachek aptly remarked, "[Abravanel's commentaries] seem at times actually to bulge out, to be overweighted with information; not that his many works are wordy or repetitious but that he has laid plans for a large edifice and has built on a deep and broad foundation. So many aspects of bible study entered into his commentary that it had to reach its colossal size."<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, the second half of Segal's observation cited above remains valid: Abarbanel was a premier educator. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's stirring portrayal of his living dialogue with the great Talmudists readily comes to mind.<sup>65</sup> However, the Rav was the Rav, capable of learning *with* the Torah giants of previous generations. For those of us more likely to learn *from* those Torah giants, Abarbanel's commentaries invite us to sit at his unabridged lectures and learn from his masterly presentations.

There is no need for a supercommentary on Abarbanel. One who patiently reads through his writings can generally ascertain what he means. "[I write] explicitly and will not test you with riddles as do Ibn Ezra and Ramban."<sup>66</sup>

Abarbanel often is inspiring. Tanakh is the bridge between the objective world of the Divine and our subjective worlds. Abarbanel injects his personality and historical setting into his writings, thereby modeling the direct link between Tanakh and real life.

For those who insist that good interpretation is limited to philology, Abarbanel contributes little and expressly intended to contribute little: "For the sake of brevity, I have omitted grammatical discussions, since

<sup>62</sup> "R. Yitshak Abarbanel as a Biblical Exegete," pp. 264-265.

<sup>63</sup> *Joshua*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Don Isaac Abravanel* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1938), p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> See *Isb ha-Halakha - Galui ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization - Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1989), p. 232; cf. *Al ha-Teshuva* (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization - Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1978), p. 296.

<sup>66</sup> *Joshua*, 13.

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they already appear in earlier commentaries—consult them.”<sup>67</sup> For those who relativize his major interpretations to historical circumstances and personal life, Abarbanel is a fascinating historical figure but obsolete as a commentator.

But for those who wish to appreciate Tanakh with its seventy facets; who want to explore every layer between the realms of narrow *peshat* and the broader world of *derash*; who constantly question in order to re-evaluate evidence and attain deeper insight; who yearn to experience Tanakh as the living word of God—they will appreciate the magnitude of Abarbanel’s achievements. In the words of one of Abarbanel’s most illustrious students:

I have studied the commentators who wrote after Radak...and nobody succeeded in breathing a living spirit into the text according to the way of *peshat*, with the exception of our teacher R.Yitshak Abarbanel and a few of his contemporaries...” (Malbim, introduction to *Joshua*).

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<sup>67</sup> *Joshua*, 13. Moshe Segal observes that *no* commentator after Radak contributed substantially in the area of philology (“R. Yitshak Abarbanel as a Biblical Exegete,” p. 262).