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## *From the Pages of Tradition*

### DON ISAAC ABARBANEL: WHO WROTE THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE?

*Premodern Jewish writers periodically explored questions surrounding the formation, authorship, literary genre, and (less frequently) original historical setting of individual biblical books, at times with great subtlety, originality, and thoroughness.<sup>1</sup> One such writer was Don Isaac Abarbanel, the celebrated financier, politician, theologian, biblical commentator, and leader of Spanish Jewry at the time of the expulsion of 1492.<sup>2</sup> In various places, but most systematically in the introductions to his commentaries on the books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), Abarbanel raises new questions or offers fresh insights into issues broached by predecessors concerning a range of literary and historical features of the divine word, especially as these relate to its "human side." He wonders about the authors of biblical books, the sources which they used, the characteristics of books written through prophecy (nevu'a) compared to those composed through the holy spirit (ru'ah ha-kodesh), and so forth.<sup>3</sup>*

*Abarbanel breaks new ground especially in his formulation and exploration of questions related to the structure and divisions of the biblical canon as a whole and the interrelationship of its parts. Why, he asks, did the sages name the canon's main divisions "Torah," "Prophets," and "Writings"? Why was the Torah's name derived from its legal part (torah = law) rather than its narrative or prophetic parts?<sup>4</sup> Why were the "prophecies and words of the holy spirit contained in the Prophets and Writings" not incorporated into the historical accounts found in the Former Prophets with which they are contemporaneous and why, instead, were they made into separate books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so on), unlike "the prophecies of Samuel, Gad, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and the rest of the prophets [referred to] in the book of Samuel and book of Kings"?<sup>5</sup> Why is King*

*David's death recounted at the beginning of the book of Kings rather than the end of the book of Samuel?<sup>6</sup> Why are the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings included in the Prophets, while Chronicles, which relates many of the same stories, is included in the Writings?<sup>7</sup> Why is the book of Ruth, which took place in the time of the judges, not part of the book of Judges? And if, for some reason, there was cause to set it off as a separate book, why was this book placed in the Writings when it too, like Judges, was written by Samuel?<sup>8</sup> How are discrepancies in parallel biblical accounts—for example, the descriptions of the reigns of King David and King Solomon in the book of Samuel contrasted with the retellings of Chronicles—to be understood? Why are such largely overlapping narratives included at all?<sup>9</sup> Abarbanel raises similar issues, albeit in lesser measure, regarding the books of the Latter Prophets.<sup>10</sup> While the full context for these queries and the novel approaches that Abarbanel often brings to them remain to be clarified, it seems clear that some of Abarbanel's unprecedented exegetical concerns, methods, and insights are traceable to humanist skills and sensibilities absorbed by him from the larger turn of the sixteenth-century Iberian and Italian milieus in which he worked.<sup>11</sup>*

*The following translation of an excerpt from the general introduction to Abarbanel's commentaries on the Former Prophets offers a sample of his biblical scholarship's literary-historical side. Abarbanel's subject is the authorship of the books of Joshua and Samuel. While much could be said about his discussion, perhaps its most striking general feature is the freedom of inquiry that Abarbanel permits himself therein while pursuing what he clearly perceives might be a sensitive issue for his more traditionally minded readers—freedom up to and including rejection of rabbinic views on biblical authorship as expressed in the main talmudic discussion of the matter in Bava Batra 14b-15b. It is worth adding that even as he insisted on the novelty of his inquiries into various literary and historical features of the Former Prophets,<sup>12</sup> Abarbanel by no means considered his conclusions the final word concerning them. At the end of his general introduction to the books of the Former Prophets, he states: "As for what I have understood of this, let the wise person pay heed and increase instruction (yishma hakham ve-yosef lekah)."<sup>13</sup> As other examples of Abarbanel's invocation of the first half of Proverbs 1:5 attest, what he meant by this was that beyond learning from his pioneering investigations, future students should also build on them.<sup>14</sup> In what measure later Jewish writers did learn from and build on Abarbanel's discourses on biblical authorship and related issues is a topic in need of investigation. It may be noted, however, that a number of later figures (e.g., Samuel Laniado at the turn of the seventeenth century, Solomon Hanau in the eighteenth century, Meir Loeb*

*ben Yehiel Michael [Malbim], and Zadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin in the nineteenth century) took strong exception to some of Abarbanel's more audacious suggestions regarding the origins and character of various biblical texts.<sup>15</sup>*

*The translation is based on the first edition of Abarbanel's Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim (Pesaro, 1511) but conforms in all essentials to the text found in the most recent and easily accessible edition.<sup>16</sup> Square brackets indicate my own interpolations.<sup>17</sup>*

## WHO WROTE THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE?

As for the agent<sup>18</sup>—that is, who was the writer (*kotev*) and compiler (*mehabber*) of these books—behold, our sages investigated this generally in the first chapter of *Bava Batra*, where they said:

Who wrote them [the Scriptures]? Moses wrote his book and the portion of Balaam and *Job*. Joshua wrote his book [i.e., the book bearing his name] and [the last] eight verses of the Torah. Samuel wrote his book and the book of *Judges* and *Ruth*. David wrote his book, which is the book of Psalms, including in it the work of the ten elders, namely, Adam, Melkhitsedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote his book, the book of *Kings*, and *Lamentations*. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote *Isaiah*, *Proverbs*, the *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes*. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote *Ezekiel*, the twelve [minor] prophets, *Daniel* and *Ahasuerus* [the *Scroll of Esther*]. Ezra wrote his book and the genealogies of the book of *Chronicles* up to his own time. This confirms the opinion of Rab, since Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: Ezra did not leave Babylon to go up to *Erets Yisrael* until he had written his own genealogy. Who then finished it [*Chronicles*]? Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.<sup>19</sup>

Behold, in this dictum, our sages explained that Joshua wrote his book and that Samuel wrote the book of *Judges*, his book, and *Ruth*, and that Jeremiah wrote the book of *Kings*. However, they objected there (*Bava Batra* 15a): “Did Joshua write his book? Behold, it is written, *Joshua son of Nun the servant of the Lord died (Josh. 24:29)*. Eleazar finished it. But behold it is written, *Eleazar the son of Aaron died (Josh. 24:31)*? Phineas and the elders finished it,” and so on.

When I probed the verses, though, I saw that the opinion that Joshua wrote his book was highly unlikely, not on account of what is said at its end [that] *Joshua died*—this alone being the difficulty that

they [the rabbinic sages] raised in the *Gemara*—but rather because of [other] verses which attest to the fact that Joshua did not write them. It says, regarding the setting up of the stones in the midst of the Jordan, *And they are there unto this day* (Josh. 4:9). It says, regarding the matter of circumcision, *Wherefore the name of that place was called Gilgal unto this day* (Josh. 5:9). It says with respect to Akhan, *Wherefore the name of that place was called the valley of Akhor unto this day* (Josh. 7:26). Regarding the Gibeonites it is said, *And Joshua made them that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord unto this day* (Josh. 9:27). It says, *Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenezite unto this day* (Josh. 14:14). Regarding the inheritance of Judah it says, *As for the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the children of Judah could not drive them out; but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day* (Josh. 15:63). So too, it is said with respect to the inheritance of Ephraim, *But the Canaanites dwell under the Ephraimites unto this day, and serve under tribute* (Josh. 16:10). Now, if Joshua wrote all of this, how could he have said *unto this day* regarding them? For [if so], the writing [of them] would have followed immediately after the occurrence of these events, whereas the force of the expression *unto this day* indicates necessarily that it was written a long time after the events happened. In addition, you will find with respect to the inheritance of the children of Dan that it says, *And the coast of the children of Dan went out [too little] for them; therefore the children of Dan went up against Leshem* (Josh. 19:47). And it is known that this was in the days of the graven image of Mikha at the end of the [period of the] Judges.<sup>20</sup> This is decisive evidence that this statement was not written until many years after Joshua's death, which proves that Joshua did not write his book.

The verses indicate that Samuel did not write his book in the very same way. For it is said there with respect to the ark in the land of the Philistines which was in his time, *Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any that come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day* (1 Sam. 5:5). It is said likewise when the Philistines returned the ark, *Even unto the great stone of Abel whereon they set down the ark of the Lord, which stone remains unto this day in the field of Joshua, the Bethshemite* (1 Sam. 6:18). Now if these events occurred in the days of Samuel, how did he say *unto this day*, which indicates the passage of a long time? In addition, you will find that when Saul comes to him to ask regarding the donkeys, it says there: *Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he said: "Come and let us go to the seer"; for he that is now called a prophet was beforetime called a seer*

(1 Sam. 9:9). And this verse indicates of necessity that Samuel did not write it; for Saul was his contemporary and so how could he say with respect to him: *Beforetime in Israel [ . . . ] for he that is now called a prophet was beforetime called a seer?* But this demonstrates by evident certainty that this was written a long time after Samuel's death, when the [linguistic] habits had changed.<sup>21</sup> In addition, you will find that it says, *And it came to pass that while the ark abode in Kirjath-Je'arim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years* (1 Sam. 7:2). Now, if Samuel wrote this as it was in his days, how could he say that the ark abode there twenty years? Behold, according to our sages,<sup>22</sup> in Samuel's days the ark had abode there but thirteen years, and it was seven years after his death that it was brought up from there by King David. It says regarding David as well, *Then Akhish gave him Tsiklag that day; wherefore Tsiklag belongs unto the kings of Judah to this day* (1 Sam. 27:6). And in Samuel's day, there were kings only over Judah. And it is said with respect to Uzza, *And he called the name of the place Perets-Uzza to this day* (2 Sam. 6:8). And it is impossible to say that Nathan the prophet or Gad the seer wrote this [as the sages affirm regarding those parts of the book that relate events after Samuel's death],<sup>23</sup> since it was in their days; hence, how could they say *unto this day?* Behold, all that I have said indicates that Samuel also did not write his book.

In consequence of all of this, I came to think that Joshua did not write his book, but rather that Samuel the prophet wrote it and that he also wrote the book of Judges. For this reason, you will not find it said in Joshua that he [Joshua] wrote it, as the Torah testifies with respect to Moses our master by saying, *Moses wrote this law* (Deut. 31:9) and, *And it came to pass when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book until they were finished* (Deut. 31:24). Now Scripture stated at the end of the book of Joshua that he [Joshua] wrote down all those things which he said to the people [in the ceremony at Shekhem; cf. Josh. 24:26]. If he wrote [the rest of] his book, how is it that Scripture did not testify to this as well? Rather, it is as I suggested: Scripture testified to what Joshua wrote and Scripture did not testify to what he did not write. And being as the book of Joshua was written by Samuel, it says the sorts of things that I mentioned—*unto this day* and the mention of the conquest of Leshem by the children of Dan—because that which is written [like the conquest] had already occurred at the time of the book's writing. The meaning, however, of that which he [Samuel, in his capacity as author of Judges] said with respect to the graven image of Mikha *until the day of the exile of the land* (Jud. 18:30) is not with respect to Israel's general exile [in 587 B.C.E.], but rather

with respect to the exile of the ark taken by the Philistines in the war that occurred in Samuel's day, as I will explain in the proper place.<sup>24</sup>

Do not be amazed that I have deviated from the opinion of our sages in this matter, since even in the *Gemara*, they did not agree on these matters. They disagreed there as to whether Moses wrote the book of *Job* (*Bava Batra* 15a-15b) and whether Joshua wrote [the last] eight verses of the Torah (*Bava Batra* 15a). Given that our sages themselves exhibited doubts in a part of the dictum [concerning biblical authorship], it is not inadmissible for me also to chose a more plausible and satisfying approach as regards a part in accordance with the nature of the verses and their straightforward purport.<sup>25</sup>

Now who wrote the book of *Samuel*? Behold, beyond what our sages wrote concerning this, as I noted, it says in *Chronicles*, after recounting David's death, *Behold the acts of King David, first and last, behold, they are written in the words of Samuel the seer and in the words of Nathan the prophet and in the words of Gad the seer*, etc. [1 *Chron.* 29:29], and this indicates that Samuel wrote his book and that it was completed by Nathan and Gad in accordance with their [the sages'] words. Indeed, I am surprised that our sages did not adduce this verse to buttress their opinion.

What I think correct concerning this matter is that Samuel recorded the events that occurred in his time and similarly [that] Nathan the prophet recorded on his own [what happened in his time] and similarly Gad the seer on his own, each one what occurred in his time. And these writings (*ketuvim*) were [eventually] gathered and compiled together (*kibbetsam ve-hibberam yahad*) by Jeremiah the prophet, who arranged (*sidder*) the book as a whole on their basis. For if this is not so, then who gathered these discourses (*ma'amarim*), which were the work of diverse agents? For Scripture does not say that they wrote their words one after the other, but rather that each wrote a book on his own. It seems, though, that Jeremiah, when he wished to write the book of Kings, prepared the book of Samuel that precedes it, and it was he who gathered the discourses of the aforementioned prophets into a book. There is no doubt that he [then] added things to clarify the discourses as he saw fit—hence its saying, *unto this day*, and it was he who wrote, *Beforetime in Israel . . . he that is now called a prophet was beforetime called a seer*, and the rest of the verses which I mentioned that indicate a later date. All of these were the work of the editor (*metakken*) and assembler (*mekabbets*).

Now, if you wish to say that Joshua wrote his book to conform to the words of our sages, say, then, that Jeremiah also [as in the case of

the book of Samuel] or Samuel gathered these discourses and made them into a book and that it was he who added to them *according to the good hand of his God* [upon him—i.e., prophetically; (Ezek. 7:9)], as I say with respect to the book of *Samuel*. This is what I wished to explain with respect to the agent and writer of these books.

## NOTES

1. See, *e.g.*, the examples analyzed in depth in Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms (From Saadia Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra)*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Albany, 1991).
2. The fullest biography and intellectual profile remains B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, 1972). For up-to-date bibliography on all aspects of Abarbanel's thought and writings, see my "Isaac Abarbanel's Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship: A Retrospective and Opportunity," in Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris, eds., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III*. In Press.
3. *E.g.*, *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1955) pp. 3-13, 162-67, 423-29.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-67.
10. *E.g.*, *Perush al Nevi'im Aharonim* (Jerusalem, 1979) pp. 3-8, 25-26 (on *Isa.* 2:1), 297-300, 422 (on *Jer.* 49:16), 434 (for *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, and *Ezekiel*); *Perush al Nevi'im uKhetuvim* (Tel Aviv, 1961) pp. 3-13 (for the *Minor Prophets*). For brief discussions of several of these examples, see my "On the Threshold of the Renaissance: New Methods and Sensibilities in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel," *Viator* 26 (1995): pp. 298-299; Moshe Greenberg, "Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy," *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta, 1989), pp. 157-159.
11. See my "On the Threshold" (previous note).
12. *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim*, p. 13. Abarbanel cites a statement of Aristotle ("It is incumbent upon us to thank earlier scholars [*rishonim*] who initiate investigations; for even if they did not achieve the truth, they nevertheless achieved disclosure of the problem. And had they not initiated investigation, we latter-day scholars [*aharonim*] could not have completed it") in justification of his initiation of new investigations. See also *ibid.*, pp. 163-164, where he states regarding the relationship between *Samuel* and *Chronicles*:  
... These are the plethora of doubts that beset this great question, and in seeking an answer and their resolution, I am bereft, with nobody work-

ing with me on them. For concerning this topic I have found nothing, great nor small, good nor bad, from our sages—not the early ones, the Talmudic masters, nor the later writers and commentators. Not even one alluded to the difficulty at all and not one among them suggested a path towards its resolution . . . .

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
14. See *Mashmia Yeshu'a* in *Perush al Nevi'im uKhetuvim*, 438; and *She'elot uTeshuvot leSha'ul haKohen* (Venice, 1574) 7b (actual as opposed to printed pagination), where, in a manner compatible with the interpretation suggested here, Abarbanel uses the same verse to indicate the attitude that one should bring to the at once magisterial and problematic religio-philosophic legacy of Maimonides. In his deployment of the verse, the phrase, "And increase instruction", is no longer the consequence of "paying heed", but a call for renewed and ongoing creativity on the part of future students.
15. See, e.g., Abarbanel's conclusion that 2 *Chron.* 20:36-37 reflects Ezra's misunderstanding of 1 *Kings* 22:49 (*Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim*, 543-544) and the reactions of Samuel Laniado (*Keli Yakar: Perush Nevi'im Rishonim, Melakhim I, 2* vols. [Jerusalem, 1988] 1:423-424) and Malbim in his commentary to 1 *Kings* 10:22). For emphatic rejection of Abarbanel's criticisms of aspects of the verbal formulations, arrangement, and written quality of Jeremiah's prophecies, see Solomon Hanau, *Binyan Shelomo* (Frankfurt am Main, 1708), *ha-hakdama ha-shelishit*, and Malbim's introduction to his commentary on *Jeremiah*. For repudiation of Abarbanel's treatment of the authorship of the books of *Joshua* and *Samuel*, see Tsadok ha-Kohen, *Or Zaru'a laTsaddik* (1927; reprinted Benei Berak, 1966) pp. 49-52 (with thanks to Dr. Sid Leiman for calling this source to my attention).
16. Above, n. 3, pp. 7-8.
17. This article, including the translation, was prepared in connection with a larger project being supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, to which I express my sincere thanks.
18. Abarbanel's exegetical terminology here requires a word of explanation. He works with a "prologue format" developed by late medieval Latin commentators, according to which biblical (and indeed secular) books were analyzed in accordance with the four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) that according to Aristotle governed all activity and change in the universe; thus, a book's author, the person who brought the literary work into being, was its "efficient cause," "motivating agent," or "actualizer." The earliest Hebrew application of the Aristotelian formula to biblical texts occurs, as far as I know (and correct on this score my "*Threshold*" [above, n. 10], p. 295 n. 72), in an early fourteenth-century work of Yehuda Romano (cited in Yosef B. Sermoneta, "Involvement in the Liberal Arts in the Jewish Community in Italy in the Fourteenth Century [Hebrew]," *HaIr ve-haKehilla: Kovets Hartsa'ot sheHushme'u beKhenes haShmem-Asar leIyyun beHistoriya* [Jerusalem, 1968], pp. 255-56). See also *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, III, 25 (ed. Isaac Husik, 5 vols. [Philadelphia, 1930] 3:217), where Joseph Albo refutes the critique of a Christian scholar who "tested" the Torah on the basis of the Aristotelian causes and found it wanting. For further use of the Aristotelian system in Jewish biblical exegesis, see Joseph

- ibn Yahya's introductions to his commentaries on *Esther*, *Song of Songs*, *Ruth*, *Lamentations*, and *Ecclesiastes*, as printed in Isaac Arama, *Akedat Yitshak*, ed. H. J. Pollack, 6 vols. (1869; reprint Jerusalem, 1960) 6 (unpaginated).
19. The translation is reproduced from Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences (Hamden, 1976) pp. 52-53, where it is also very amply and helpfully annotated.
  20. See the commentaries of Rashi and Radak *ad. loc.*
  21. See *Perush R. Yosef Kara al Nevi'im Rishonim*, ed. Simon Eppenstein (Jerusalem, 1972) p. 65, where, on the basis of the same verse, it is also concluded that the book of *Samuel* "was not written in the days of Samuel." Cf., however, Radak, *ad. loc.*, who tries to uphold what he takes to be an authoritative rabbinic tradition regarding Samuel's authorship. For Radak's general conservatism with respect to rabbinic attributions of biblical authorship, see Frank Ephraim Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) pp. 113-14.
  22. *Seder Olam*, chapter 13 (= *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, ed. Ad. Neubauer, in *Anecdota Oxoniensia, Semitic Series* [1895] 2:44).
  23. *Bava Batra* 15a: "Samuel wrote his book. But is it not written, *Now Samuel was dead* (1 *Sam.* 28:3)? Gad the seer and Nathan the prophet completed it."
  24. *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim*, 148. Cf. Rashi's commentary *ad. loc.*
  25. Abarbanel is hardly the first gaonic or medieval writer not to feel bound by pronouncements on biblical authorship as expressed in the *Beraita* in *Bava Batra* and subsequent Talmudic discussion; see, e.g., the examples of Saadya Gaon, Moses haKohen ibn Gikatila, and Abraham ibn Ezra as regards Psalms, in Simon, *Four Approaches* (e.g., pp. 13-15, 122-37, 182-86, 275 n. 99). Abarbanel's rationale for breaking with the rabbinic view is in keeping with his position advanced elsewhere, that where rabbinic sources speak with more than one voice, an authoritative tradition (*kabbala*) binding on later authorities may be presumed absent. In the immediate case, however, he faces the difficulty that even as the sages debated aspects of the authorship issue, they also seemingly concurred that Joshua wrote all of "his book" but for its concluding verses. Seeking to address this problem, Abarbanel refits his standard argument, arguing that despite unanimity as regards the authorship of *Joshua*, other ascriptions of authorship contained in the *Beraita* are disputed; hence, it may be inferred that *none* of the ascriptions are authoritative views by which he is bound.