

REVIEW ESSAY

THREE RECENT BOOKS ON ISAAC ABARBANEL/  
ABRAVANEL (1437–1508/9)

by

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Eric Lawee. *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 320 pp.

Seymour Feldman. *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel, Defender of the Faith*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003. 213 pp.

Alfredo Fabio Borodowski. *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil: The Tension Between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. 241 pp.

If quantity is any measure of importance, then Isaac Abarbanel/Abravanel—the fascinating statesman and financier, polemicist and messianic theorist, exegete and philosopher-theologian—has certainly risen very high indeed in the study of medieval Jewish thought. Although never an obscure figure in modern scholarship, having already been the subject of several monographs and dozens of articles, the publication of three books in as many years moves him closer to his more respected predecessors: Maimonides, Gersonides, and Crescas. That there is little overlap in these new books, moreover, which approach the extensive and diverse corpus of Abarbanel's writing in very different ways, shows that this interest in his writings is more than a passing fad. Lawee and Feldman, in particular, not only introduce the reader to various aspects of Abarbanel's life and thought, but point to new areas of research that deserve further investigation. Like any good scholarship, not only do they summarize and synthesize, connecting particular details to larger themes and concerns, but they also challenge conventional views, forcing the reader to return to the sources themselves to look afresh at the writings of this medieval master.

Because these books complement each other in interesting ways, and approach the same subject from such diverse perspectives, it will be useful and instructive to look at them together. The following review essay will summarize the content of each book successively, examine their methods, and consider their relation to one another, focusing attention on areas of continuity and convergence. Each book in its own way contributes to an understanding not only of Abarbanel and his thought, but of the study of medieval Jewish history, philosophy, and exegesis in general.

ISAAC ABARBANEL'S STANCE TOWARD TRADITION

Eric Lawee's book, a substantial revision of his 1993 Harvard dissertation, includes also revised versions of articles that were themselves revisions of chapters in the dissertation. It is the fruit of over a decade of research, which is reflected in its thoroughness and depth. Attention to detail is evidenced in the bibliography and extensive notes, as well as in the text itself, where there is great care taken in constructing a complex framework within which to work. Abarbanel is considered in relation to his predecessors, contemporaries, and followers, with sources and parallel developments identified and examined. This "long approach" to intellectual biography, which draws from several different disciplines—especially intellectual history, literary history, and the history of mentalities—allows Lawee to paint a colorful portrait of a late medieval sage that pays as much attention to the background as to the primary subject. Not only Abarbanel the exegete emerges, but also the complicated workings of the medieval mind, which searches creatively for new ideas in the traditional literature of the past.

The book consists of an introduction and eight chapters. The introduction sets the scene and introduces the reader to Abarbanel the man and his work, highlighting the "opportunity" (to use an expression from another publication by Lawee) his writings present to the historian of Jewish culture due to his engagement in so many different fields and genres, and his role in and close relation to so many important historical events. Here the reader is introduced to Lawee himself, as well, and to his method. He explains that his goal is "religious-intellectual biography" in a very broad sense, which considers habits of thought and habits of reading, religious preoccupations, rhetorical devices and literary topoi, and literary tastes and sensibilities more generally, as represented in method, genre, and style. The goal, he explains, is to examine Abarbanel in relation to all his contexts—past and present, Jewish and non-Jewish, literary and exegetical, geographical, historical, and intellectual—in order to appreciate better the interplay between continuity and innovation, tradition and change.

Chapter 1 ("Life and Contexts") and Chapter 2 ("Works and Traditions") are closely related to each other and make good on the introduction's promise of close contextual analysis. Together they present the life and works of Abarbanel in relation to his various traditions and settings: historical, political, and geographical in Chapter 1; literary and cultural in Chapter 2. Emphasized are the court intrigues in Portugal, Spain, and Italy, the expulsion from Spain and explorations of the new world, the conquest of Constantinople and related Christian apocalypticism, developments of the Spanish and Italian Renaissances, and the emergence of the printing press. All of these are considered in relation to developments in Abarbanel's life, using contemporary sources and archival material together with Abarbanel's own autobiographical remarks. Each of Abarbanel's writings are then described chronologically in relation to contemporary political and literary trends. Not only is each book briefly outlined and characterized, noting bibliographical problems or peculiarities, but the entire world of elite learning in which it was written is reconstructed, relating to questions such as: Who was writing in that location at that time? What were the literary and intellectual traditions that were dominant at that place

and that time? How might they have influenced Abarbanel? This is the case especially with Portugal, Spain, Naples, and Corfu, while the discussion of writings in Monopoli and Venice, in contrast, is almost exclusively literary. Perhaps evidence is lacking for this period, or perhaps Lawee considered historical and cultural trends less relevant at this later stage of Abarbanel's career, when he was already set in his ways with respect to intellectual outlook and literary style.

In Chapters 3 through 6, Lawee shifts from the general to the specific; from a consideration of all traditions and contexts to three in particular: the Maimonidean, the Rabbinic, and the Humanistic. Chapter 3 ("To the Help of the Lord Against the Mighty") focuses on one early work, *ʿAteret zeqenim*, in order to show Abarbanel's complex relation to Maimonides and his interpreters. The explanation of one difficult passage in Exodus 24 is the point of departure in a defense of the "nobles of the children of Israel" against those exegetes who condemn their hasty pursuit of divine wisdom. Abarbanel here uses the language of the Rabbis and of Maimonides himself to justify his own departure from their interpretations, which leads him to the surprising defense of a traditionalist conception of prophecy by undermining the traditional interpretations of the text.

Chapter 4 ("Rabbinic Legacy") establishes the background for Chapter 5 ("The Rabbinic Hermeneutic") and Chapter 6 ("In Search of Classical Jewish Eschatology"). Building upon the research of Isadore Twersky and Marc Saperstein, Lawee summarizes the long tradition of interpreting rabbinic aggadot, which was developed for polemical and apologetic reasons and used by philosophers and kabbalists alike to teach and disseminate their own doctrines and opinions. Abarbanel is then placed within this history, showing how he consciously drew from existing approaches to rabbinic literature but innovated in various ways. This is shown in his biblical commentaries, where, despite his stated quest for *peshat*, he uses midrashic devices frequently and often cites midrashim, although more often than not interpreting them in light of his own political and theological interests. The relation to the tradition of *perush aggadah* is especially clear in Chapter 6, where Lawee focuses on one book, *Yeshu'ot meshiho*, which consists of Abarbanel's explanation of rabbinic texts that relate to the Messiah. After surveying all of the existing approaches to aggadah in his preface to this work, Abarbanel proceeds to chart a new course, in which the rabbinic texts will be considered on their own merit, so he claims, although here as well, this quest for a new attitude to the old still draws from existing interpretations, if not in content then certainly in method and approach. Abarbanel's vision of a new hermeneutic is never completely unobscured by a constant grappling with tradition.

In Chapter 7 ("Historical Thinking, Critical Reading, and the Study of Classical Jewish Texts"), Lawee then shifts from the Jewish to the non-Jewish, to show how Abarbanel, the first Jewish exegete to evince strong interests in history and historiography, might have been influenced by the Humanistic traditions of the Renaissance. This Lawee illustrates through Abarbanel's critical study of the biblical text, rabbinic tradition, and also Christian texts. He approached such questions as who wrote the biblical books and what exactly is the biblical chronology with greater determination and critical acumen than his medieval predecessors, with a clear sense of documentation and historical bias. Although Abarbanel's historical

thinking is still far from that of Azariah De Rossi, Lawee notes, he should nevertheless be considered a forerunner of the Renaissance turn to history and historiography. In order to strengthen Abarbanel's connection with the Renaissance, moreover, Lawee also considers his use of sources, for Abarbanel was not only the first real Jewish critical historian but also the first to make extensive use of Latin texts: classical, patristic, scholastic, and exegetical.

In the final chapter, Chapter 8 ("Abarbanel and Tradition"), Lawee classifies by way of conclusion the different trends in Abarbanel's attitude to tradition. Abarbanel is considered a "harvester," collecting and building upon tradition in a very self-conscious way. He is a Jewish humanist of sorts, returning to the Jewish classics in a way not completely dissimilar to the Renaissance approach to classical Greece and Rome. Emphasizing this creative use of tradition, Lawee is able to portray Abarbanel as an original thinker and even a pioneer, which is contrary to the traditional scholarly portrait of a man of more moderate skill; a compiler and derivative thinker or even a plagiarist.

The specific traditions considered by Lawee in his study of Abarbanel are many: Maimonidean and anti-Maimonidean, Rabbinic and Kabbalistic, exegetical and grammatical, scholastic and humanistic. He also touches upon various literary and cultural trends as well, and points to others that deserve further research, such as the tradition of allegorical exegesis. Indeed, Lawee himself is as much attuned to tradition as is his subject, always noting the biblical or rabbinic background of a turn of phrase or exegetical insight, and also recognizing the modern traditions of scholarship that inform his own discourse. Thus, his discussion of the rabbinic hermeneutic, for example, is informed by the categories and terminology of contemporary midrash scholarship, while the most recent work on Renaissance Humanism, especially that of Anthony Grafton, serves as the guiding framework in his evaluation of Abarbanel's Renaissance sensibilities. Lawee is very self-conscious in his own approach, setting himself squarely in a particular tradition of intellectual history. The one major tradition that he does not approach is philosophy and the history of philosophy. This he leaves to the work of Seymour Feldman.

#### PHILOSOPHY IN A TIME OF CRISIS

The shift from Lawee's intellectual history and history of mentalities to Feldman's history of philosophy and history of ideas is sharp and decisive. It is apparent in the title itself and especially in the table of contents, which looks more like traditional doxography than historical investigation of tradition. The difference in the approaches employed by these two scholars is also evident in their choice of sources. While Lawee focuses more on Abarbanel's biblical commentaries and exegetical monographs, Feldman pays particular attention to the systematic works of theology or philosophy, or what he calls "philosophical theology." In order to illustrate further these contrasting approaches to medieval Jewish thought and history, Feldman's book will be discussed in some detail. As with Lawee, the content of the parts and chapters will be summarized with a view to considering issues of method and presentation.

*Philosophy in a Time of Crisis* consists of three parts and eighteen chapters. Part 1 (“Introduction”), which includes three chapters, is introductory, providing historical and philosophical background, and surveying Abravanel’s (Feldman’s preferred spelling) life and writings. The focus here is Hasdai Crescas and his legacy; a fuller introduction to Maimonides and Gersonides, who are no less important for understanding Abravanel, would have been very welcome here, as well. Part 2 (“Isaac Abravanel’s Philosophy of Judaism”), which includes ten chapters, focuses on the beliefs and opinions of Isaac Abravanel in relation to the long history of philosophical discussions about these same issues, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Part 3 (“Judah Abravanel—‘An inheritance for your children’”), which includes four chapters, presents the life and work of Isaac’s son Judah, better known as Leone Ebreo, the author of the popular *Dialogues of Love* (*Dialoghi d’amore*). Although the chapters in this third part give an excellent brief introduction to Judah’s life and work, they serve more than anything to provide contrast, by focusing on characteristics of Judah’s Renaissance thought that are missing from the work of his father. The final chapter, Chapter 18, highlights this contrast, using father and son to illustrate the complex transition from medieval to Renaissance.

In what follows, the focus will be on Part 2, which is the longest and most detailed section of the book. It is in this second part, which is devoted to summarizing and explaining the most difficult philosophical and theological arguments in Abravanel’s corpus, that Feldman’s idiosyncratic brilliance shines forth.

Feldman begins his summary of Abravanel’s “Philosophy of Judaism” with a discussion of religious belief in general (Chapter 4). Focusing on the commentary on *Guide* 1:50 rather than on the dogmatic *Rosh ’amanah*, he contrasts Abravanel’s view on this subject with that of his predecessors. Unlike Maimonides, for instance, faith requires will as well as intellect, and unlike Crescas, it requires effort; like Abraham, one needs to saddle up the mule and embark upon an active search for religious meaning. Chapter 5 then turns from belief in general to the most important belief of all: creation of the world. Following the order of *Mif’alot elohim*, Feldman summarizes Abravanel’s views on this subject, again in relation to his predecessors. Abravanel first rejects the view of eternal creation (held in different ways by Averroes and Crescas), critiques the view of creation from preexistent matter (defended by Gersonides), and refutes the Aristotelian arguments for eternity, before setting forth his own defense of creation, which asserts an absolute creation from nothing by a willful God. God created the world and also, Abravanel maintains, God will destroy the world, but this does not mean that there will not be other worlds, as well. Here Feldman alludes to, but unfortunately never expands upon, the idea that Abravanel held to the possibility of a plurality of worlds.

Abravanel’s traditionalist defense of creation ex nihilo is matched by his equally traditionalist defense of miracles, which is the subject of Chapter 6. The framework with respect to this subject is established by Maimonides and Gersonides, who both argued for a very natural conception of miracles. Abravanel, in contrast, draws on al-Ghazali to defend a literalist understanding of the biblical accounts of God’s direct involvement in the natural world. He argues that, although

logical impossibilities cannot be brought about by God, natural impossibilities can, including natural events of abnormal duration or unusual force (e.g. the Flood; the plagues of hail), and direct breaches of nature, such as the stopping of the sun for Joshua at Gibon. Contrary to Gersonides in particular, Abravanel rejects the opinion that the active intellect is the cause of miracles. In fact, Abravanel seems to reject the doctrine of the active intellect entirely (another important development in the history of philosophy that Feldman leaves unexplored). Also against Gersonides, Abravanel argues that the degree of possibility in a miracle is not in any way linked to a prophet's status. Although miracles are divine in origin, he maintains, they are historically determined: God brings about a miracle not due to some pre-existent necessity or prophetic power but, rather, in response to the historical needs of the time.

This philosophical defense of tradition continues in Chapters 7 ("Prophecy") and 8 ("Divine Omniscience and Human Choice"). Drawing from the commentary on the *Guide* and the biblical and rabbinic commentaries, Feldman describes here Abravanel's general praise of prophetic knowledge before turning to his critique of Maimonides and defense of tradition. Here again Abravanel undermines the doctrine of the active intellect in developing his own novel approach to the problem of divine communication, in which he stresses imagination over intellect and experience over thought. Not only does God directly relay information to the prophet without intermediaries, but he also creates unique sense experiences that are available to everyone, an idea which Feldman calls "perceptual prophecy." With the discussion of the antinomy of free will and divine knowledge, Feldman then turns more to problems of logic than to those of natural science and cognition. Using modern terminology and homespun examples, he contrasts Abravanel's "compatibilism" with Crescas' "soft determinism." Whereas Crescas believed that human actions were determined with respect to their cause but free with respect to themselves, Abravanel argued that they were free also with respect to their cause. To use Feldman's example, the philosophy professor can teach his class or go to the movies. If he is lazy, according to Crescas, he will go to the movies, even though he could have done otherwise if he weren't lazy. According to Abravanel, even though lazy by nature, the professor can nevertheless change or overcome his predisposition and act contrary to his nature.

In Chapters 9 through 12, the final chapters that focus on theological doctrines, the emphasis is on eschatology. Abravanel's views on immortality of the soul (Ch. 9) are discussed in relation to the medieval debates about conjunction with the active intellect. Contrary to Aristotle and the Aristotelians, Abravanel is presented as a Platonist, on account of his belief that the soul is a separate substance (although created); that there is recollection and reincarnation; that final reward comes more through purifying action than perfecting thought; and that the wicked as well as the righteous survive eternally, although to suffer punishment rather than reward. The discussion of providence (Ch. 11) is likewise framed by the philosophical background, with Abravanel aligned with Halevi and Crescas and against Maimonides and Gersonides. Like his antiphilosophical predecessors, Abravanel stresses the particular over the universal: the special providence of Israel among the nations and the unique status of the Land of Israel among geo-

graphical climes. With Resurrection (Ch. 10) and Messianism (Ch. 12), however, Feldman stresses that these two subjects do not have a true philosophical pedigree, and thus he treats them much less extensively. This, I think, is unfortunate. Resurrection in particular is an excellent if unexplored research site in the history of philosophy, with respect to issues of generation and individuation, and Messianism plays a significant role in the history of political philosophy.

Feldman's discussion of philosophical–theological principles is very lively indeed. He focuses on the arguments themselves, uses modern terminology to frame his discussion, and invents his own examples to help illustrate the difficult topics. In order to emphasize the philosophical nature of his subject, he discusses Abravanel not only in relation to his historical interlocutors—Maimonides, Gersonides, and Crescas—but also in relation to the major figures in the history of philosophy that relate to the issues of concern. Thus, Abravanel is made to rub elbows with Aristotle, Aristotelians, and anti-Aristotelians (Alexander, Themistius, Philoponus, Averroes); Plato and the Platonists (Philo, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus); Stoics and Epicureans; church fathers and medieval schoolmen (Augustine, Tertullian, Boethius, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Nicole Oresme); and even modern authors, from Spinoza and Descartes to Hume, Kant, and even William James and B. F. Skinner. Using his broad knowledge of the history of philosophy, and allowing himself a great deal of historical freedom, Feldman in this way manages to create an engaging introduction not only to Abravanel but to all the major issues that exercised his interest.

Despite this very open history of ideas, however, Feldman concludes this section of the book (Ch. 13) with a surprising return to history. No matter how much Abravanel may seem to have access to Latin and philosophical sources, he concludes, no matter how much some of his ideas might resemble Plato's and Plotinus's, Abravanel was still very much a medieval. Here Feldman focuses on Abravanel's superficial knowledge of Plato, Plotinus, and Hellenistic philosophy, and his failure to show any real systematic antirationalistic philosophy such as that which developed in the Renaissance. In light of this conclusion, more historical sensitivity would have been appropriate in the philosophical discussion; and the conclusion itself could have presented a more thorough judgment regarding Abravanel's use of sources. For example, among the most frequently mentioned authors in the book is Aquinas, and yet it is never made clear what the exact relationship was between these two like-minded “defenders of the faith.”

#### ISAAC ABRAVANEL ON MIRACLES

The books by Lawee and Feldman are very good, and certainly merit close reading. They also complement each other perfectly: one could read these two books and no others on Abravanel and have a fairly comprehensive understanding of his life and thought. The same cannot be said about Borodowski, which is a very slightly revised version of a 1997 Jewish Theological Seminary dissertation. In contrast to the books by Lawee and Feldman, this work is not written well, and it lacks a sophisticated frame of reference, whether intellectual history and the history of mentalities or the history of philosophy and ideas. It is filled with mistakes, typos,

awkward locutions, mistranslations, mistransliterations, poor documentation, misdocumentation, and obscure statements. The author is clearly not a native speaker, but even when the English itself is understandable, the arguments are not. The book is also characterized by a general ignorance of or misuse of secondary sources.

To his credit, the author clearly has a love of and enthusiasm for the subject; however, there are just too many errors to ignore. There is also a strange bravado about making an original contribution to the field without recognizing the important work done by his predecessors. Although I would prefer to avoid making comments about this book, I think it is worthwhile to summarize briefly its contents and to remark upon a few of its problems, particularly those relating to the use of secondary sources. As with the analysis of Lawee and Feldman, this, too, can be instructive with respect to method.

Although the ambitious title of Borodowski's book refers to Abravanel on miracles, creation, prophecy, and evil, the focus throughout is on miracles. In fact, the investigation is even more narrowly defined: Abravanel's discussion of miracles in *Mif'alot elohim* 10. Borodowski's subtitle ("The tension between medieval Jewish philosophy and biblical commentary") is also misleading, for the discussion throughout is based on the systematic theological works. With one exception, the biblical commentaries are cited as corroborating evidence only; any "tension," in other words, is between philosophy and scripture rather than philosophy and biblical commentary. The book itself is organized around the major problems that arise in Abravanel's discussion of miracles in this last book of his theological text. These include the following: the possible and the impossible; the naturally impossible and the logically impossible; miracles and creation ex nihilo; miracles and the will of God; miracles and the problem of free will; the cause of miracles, whether God or the active intellect; the purpose of miracles; and miracles and prophecy.

Here now are a few examples to illustrate Borodowski's use of secondary sources. While the book is focused on Abravanel, it rightly provides extensive background discussion of Maimonides and Gersonides, but Borodowski does not allow this discussion to benefit from the latest scholarship. For Gersonides he cites the fine research of Eisen, Feldman, Kellner, and Staub, for example, but seems completely unaware of Freudenthal, Glasner, Goldstein, and Manekin. When he does use Kellner, Feldman, and others, moreover, he usually cites them for their conclusions rather than their evidence; they are cited as final authorities rather than as scholars who have helped pave the way for this new investigation of the subject. Articles by Kellner and others are simply summarized without adding anything new, while articles by Kreisel and Ravitzky are sacked and plundered. Ravitzky's article on the "anthropological theory of miracles," which serves as the framework for Borodowski's Chapter 7, is an excellent example of the latter. Here Ravitzky is cited at the outset and frequently in the notes; but what isn't indicated is the extent to which Borodowski takes over Ravitzky's notes sometimes whole cloth. In other words, Avicenna, al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Daud, Ibn Kaspi, Narboni, Crescas, Bibago, and others pass directly from Ravitzky's notes to Borodowski's, with little evidence of any new reading in between.

Although I feel very uncomfortable having to identify these problems, I think it is important to do so nonetheless, for the careful use of secondary sources is itself an important part of scholarship. Perhaps more time in Jewish Studies ought to be devoted to teaching not only the close reading of primary texts—which should always be central—but the methods with which we study them and the way in which we speak about them. If the vast corpus of Abravanel is in fact an “opportunity” for gaining greater insight into medieval history and thought, then it should be exploited responsibly and with respect, not only for Abravanel himself but also for the centuries of learned attempts to make sense of his diverse writings.