Gersonides' Afterlife

Studies on the Reception of Levi ben Gerson's Philosophical, Halakhic and Scientific Oeuvre in the 14th through 20th Centuries

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CHAPTER 6

A Fifteenth-Century Reader of Gersonides: Don Isaac Abravanel, Providence, Astral Influences, Active Intellect, and Humanism

Cedric Cohen Skalli and Oded Horezky

1 Introduction

Abravanel's reception of Gersonides is the outcome of many factors that reflect his complex position on the role of philosophy and the relationship between religion, science and other forms of knowledge such as history and rhetoric. His attitude towards the master of Orange was informed by a wide range of sources, including the Jewish-Islamic philosophical tradition, Crescas and his fifteenth-century "followers," Christian scholasticism, and early Humanism. The way in which these sources influenced Don Isaac's understanding of the Gersonidean corpus can be innovativatively understood through the rapprochement they produce in Abravanel's work between two opposed but related figures: the Jewish philosopher and scientist Gersonides and the Italian Christian poet and humanist Petrarch.

Gersonides and Petrarch were near contemporaries, 1288–1344 and 1304–1374, respectively. Both scholars were affiliated with the Papal Court of Avignon during the first decades of the fourteenth century.[1] Furthermore, even though there is no record of any direct encounter between them, both were intellectual partners of the poet, musical theorist, and scholar Philippe de Vitri during his stay at the court of Clement VI in 1342–1343.[2] De Vitri, a friend of Petrarch's, is known to have asked Gersonides for the solution of a mathematical ques-

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[1] On Petrarch's early life in Avignon and Provence, see Ugo Dotti, *Pétrarque* (Paris, 1991). For biographical information about Gersonides and his connection with the court of Pope Clement VI, see Charles Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonides* (Paris, 1992), 33–48.

[2] See: Alfred Coville, "Philippe de Vitri: Notes biographiques," *Romania* 59 (1933): 531–533; Andrew Wathey, "The Motet Text of Philippe de Vitri in German Humanist Manuscripts of the Fifteen Century," in *Music in the German Renaissance*, ed. John Kmetz (Cambridge, 1994), 195–201; Andrew Wathey, "The Motets of Philippe de Vitry and the Fourteenth-Century Renaissance," *Early Music History* 12 (1993): 119–150. On the perception of Clement VI in Petrach's *Bucolicum Carmen* and *Liber sine nomine*, see: Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *Studies In the Life And*

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tion, needed to ground his reform of musical notation on firm mathematical grounds. The result of this request was Gersonides' treatise *On Harmonic Numbers* (*De numeris harmonicis*), which he completed in 1342.[3]

The absence of any recorded encounter between the Tuscan poet and the Jewish philosopher might not be just fortuitous, to judge by Petrarch's *Invective contra medicum*, written at the Papal Court in the early 1350s, in which the poet and humanist insults his adversary, a physician and follower of Averroes, with the following words: "If you could, you would challenge Christ to whom you privately prefer Averroes."[4] Although the *Contra medicum* is addressed to an unknown but Christian physician of the Pope, it is significant that Gersonides' brother, Salomon, was also a papal physician. After Gersonides' death (April 20, 1344), Salomon collaborated on a Latin translation of the *Prognostication*, which Gersonides had written at the request of Clement VI.[5] Petrarch, too, was acquainted with Clement VI.[6] As a Jew, an Aristotelian philosopher, and a scholar and commentator of Averroes,[7] Gersonides had very little chance of attracting Petrarch, who saw medieval Aristotelian philosophy as a form of "barbarism" and looked for a new synthesis of Christianity and classical philosophy in Augustine, Cicero, and Seneca. Petrarch's 1350 letter to Philippe de Vitri exemplifies his critical attitude towards the model of the philosopher-scientist.

Works of Petrarch (Cambridge, 1955), 48–62; Etienne Anheim, *Clément VI au travail, lire, écrire, prêcher au XIV^{ème} siècle* (Paris, 2014), 41–68.

[3] Eric Warner, "The Mathematical Foundation of Philippe de Vitri's 'Ars nova'," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 9 (1956): 128–132, on 129. On Gersonides and Vitri concerning music and mathematics, see: José Luis Mancha, "The Latin Translation of Levi Ben Gerson's Astronomy," in *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth Century: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Leiden, 1992), 21–46, on 21; Karine Chemla and Serge Pahaut, "Remarques sur les ouvrages mathématiques de Gersonide," in *Studies on Gersonides*, ed. Freudenthal, 149–191; Meyer Christian and Jean-François Wicker, "Musique et mathématique au XIV^{e} siècle: Le De numeris harmonicis de Leo Hebraeus," *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 50 (2000): 30–67.

[4] Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, 2008), 34. On the years in which he wrote the *Invectives*, see Wilkins, *Studies*, 81–181.

[5] Bernard R. Goldstein and David Pingree, "Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication for the Conjunction of 1345," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 80(6) (Philadelphia, 1990): 29, 34; Mancha, "The Latin Translation," 22.

[6] Anheim, *Clément VI au travail*, 31–68.

[7] On Gersonides' supercommentaries on Averroes, see: Ruth Glasner, "On the Writing of Gersonides' Philosophical Commentaries," in *Les méthodes de travail de Gersonide*, ed. C. Sirat, S. Klein-Braslavy, and O. Weijers (Paris, 2003), 90–103; Ruth Glasner, "Levi Ben Gershom and the Study of Ibn Rushd in the Fourteenth Century," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 86 (1995): 51–90; Sara Klein-Braslavy, *"Without Any Doubt": Gersonides on Method and Knowledge*, trans. and ed. Lenn J. Schramm (Leiden, 2011), 181–220.

There and on many other occasions, Petrarch mocks this type—here embodied in the figure of his friend de Vitri.[8] Perhaps Gersonides would have seen in Petrarch's mockery of Averroes and medieval Aristotelian philosophy as a rejection of his own person, of his scientific and theological project, and of the role of Jewish intellectuals as cultural agents.

Nevertheless, we would like to suggest that the dialogue that never took place between Gersonides and Petrarch in their lifetime occurred, as it were, in the later reception of their work by Abravanel, written more than a hundred years later, in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas.[9] As we shall demonstrate, the history of the reception of Gersonides' and Petrarch's works produced connections that were impossible in the lifetime of the authors. In the following pages, we will propose two different but related contextualizations of Abravanel's reception of Gersonides. The first deals with Abravanel's perception of Gersonides' place in the history of Jewish and Islamic philosophy and with central aspects of Abravanel's complex reception of Gersonides in his own work (sections I, II, and III). The second deals with Christian and Jewish philosophical trends in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which informed Abravanel's attitude towards Gersonides and entailed a certain rapprochement between Jewish and Petrarchan positions (sections IV, V, VI, and VII).

2 Contrapuntal Portraits of Two Jewish Intellectuals

2.1 *Don Isaac Abravanel: A Multifaceted Reader of Gersonides*

A close examination of Abravanel's commentaries and treatises reveals an intense reading of Gersonides' work (especially *The Wars of the Lord* and his biblical commentaries) and a lively discussion of Gersonides' theses. Second only to Maimonides, Gersonides served Abravanel as the starting point and initial reference from which he developed his own stands on a wide variety of subjects, especially in philosophy, cosmology and theology, but also in biblical exegesis. For example, at the end of the long introduction to his commentary on the Former Prophets (1483–1484), Abravanel explains his own division of the biblical books into *parshiyot* (exegetical sections) in the following way:

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[8] "For you seem, O distinguished sir …, to have aged not so much in body as in mind. But if this could happen to you amidst such a wealth of learning and virtues, what are we to think will happen to those naked and defenseless ones with no consolation in their virtue and no assistance from letters. … You will not deny that the mind can also die if it can grow old. … Once we concede this, you see what follows: both the sweetness of life as a whole and the hope of immortality are snatched away" (Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters, IX–XVI*, trans. Aldo Bernardo [Baltimore, 1982], 34–35). For a critical edition, see Pétrarque, *Lettres familieres, Tome III Livres VIII–XI; Rerum Familiarium Libri VIII–XI*, trans. A. Longpré, ed. and annot. Ugo Dotti (Paris, 2003), 194–196.

[9] For a description of Abravanel's life and work, see: Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Towards Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany, 2001); Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (London, 1988).

> They will not be long and extensive, as Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, may his memory be blessed, divided them, who included the entire book of Joshua in four sections, the book of Judges in five sections, and the book of Samuel again in five sections. Nor will they [the sections] be short and brief, the way the sage Jerome did, who translated the Scriptures for the Christians. …[10]

It often seems that Abravanel's *Commentary on the Former Prophets* was written in opposition to Gersonides' and to some theses of *The Wars of the Lord*. No doubt, Abravanel had both works at hand when he was composing his own work. In many ways, Don Isaac adopted Ḥasdai Crescas's vision of the history of Jewish philosophy, which fixed Maimonides and Gersonides as the two main Jewish philosophical partners-adversaries.[11] As we shall demonstrate, Abravanel's writings contain a complex response to Gersonides' work, which combines harsh criticism and deep influence, but sometimes also praise.

Modern scholarship has emphasized Abravanel's criticism of Gersonides' Aristotelian rationalism as a way of defining his position in Jewish philosophy.[12] We suggest, however, that Abravanel's intense reading and discussion of Gersonides' work cannot be reduced to a confrontation between a bold rationalist and a conservative mind. Other layers of dialogue and influence have to be unearthed.[13]

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[10] Abravanel, *Peruš Abarbarnel Nevi'im ri'šonim* (Jerusalem, 1960), 13a.

[11] Cf. Crescas' discussion on creation: Ḥasdai Crescas, *Or Adonai* (Jerusalem, 1990), 3:1.

[12] Netanyahu's monograph is a typical of this approach: Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 106. See also Jacob Guttmann, *Die Religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel* (Breslau, 1916), 11, 82–92.

[13] As argued by Warren Z. Harvey in a lecture in Geneva in 2014, Crescas's reception of Gersonides must also be taken into account. For Abravanel's negative attitude towards Gersonides, see: Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides and His Cultured Despisers: Arama and Abravanel," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1976): 269–296; Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith* (London, 2003). And see also Charles Manekin, "Conservative Tendencies *in Gersoni*des' Religious Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge, 2003), 304–344, on 304 and nn. 8–9.

A close look at Abravanel's biblical commentaries and works uncovers hundreds of mentions of Gersonides' name and quotations of his opinions or works, which clearly attests to his significance for Don Isaac.[14] Yet numbers cannot tell the full story. The nature and quality of these many references to the Gersonidean corpus must be characterized as well. Sometimes Gersonides appears only by name and with a brief mention of his view, but Abravanel also specifies individual sections and chapter of the *Wars*—including the "astronomical part" (*Wars*, Book 5, Part 1)—or passages in his biblical commentaries.[15] Occasionally, Don Isaac writes a relatively long explanation and critical discussion of Gersonides' views, with an evaluation of Gersonides' arguments.[16] He quotes passages or provides a paraphrase that is close to the Gersonidean source.[17] In certain discussions, he even integrates Gersonides into a sort of "history of philosophy," placing him in relation to other scholars or philosophers.[18] At times, Abravanel criticizes Crescas's analysis of a particular Gersonidean opinion, on account of a supposed misunderstanding of the latter's argument or concept.[19] He often juxtaposes Maimonides' and Crescas's positions and methods with those of Gersonides and then presents his own view.[20] He criticizes Gersonides' interpretation of Aristotle and compares it with Averroes's interpretation.[21]

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[14] According to the Responsa Project database, Gersonides is mentioned 73 times in Abravanel's commentary on the Pentateuch. A search of Abravanel's commentaries on the Former Prophets and on Daniel, as well as *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, turns up 80, 27, and 10 mentions, respectively. *Mifʿalot Elohim* and *Shamayim ḥadashim* include a long debate with Gersonides on creation. All told, there are more than 300 references to Gersonides in the Abravanelian corpus. For a description of the different works of Abravanel, see Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 9–57, Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3–91.

[15] See below on Abravanel's reading and use of the "astronomical part" (*Wars*, 5:1:44).

[16] Abravanel, *Sefer Mifʿalot ʾElohim* 9:7 (Jerusalem, [1863] 1967), 73a–b. Abravanel displays a deep interest in Gersonides' proofs of the creation, preferring the one based on the notion of "resulting from the act of an agent" (*nifʿal mi-peʿullat poʿel*) (which must be attributed to anything that has a final cause) and the characteristics of generated substances (*segullot ha-hoveh*), see Levi ben Gerson, *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:1:6–9 (Berlin, 1923), 312–328; Levi Ben Gerson, *The Wars of The Lord*, trans. Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia, 1984–1999), 3: 239–269.

[17] Cf. Gersonides' and Abravanel's exegesis on Gen. 31:19: Abravanel, *Peruš Abarbanel la-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1979), 1: 331. And see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan, 1999), 238 n. 47 (Heb.).

[18] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* (Jerusalem, 1994), 64.

[19] Abravanel, *Sefer Shamayim ḥadashim* (Jerusalem, [1828] 1966), 27a. As mentioned above, Abravanel defends Gersonides' proof of creation to a certain extent. He argues (ibid, 27b) that—because he had not studied al-Ghazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and Averroes's *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*—Crescas did not understand Gersonides' proof and in fact did not understand the nature of the debate. Abravanel (ibid, 26b–28a) refers to Crescas's discussion of creation in *Or Adonai* 3:1:4, esp. 300–309; see also Abravanel, *Mifʿalot ʾElohim* 9:7, p. 73a. Crescas had already been criticized by Joseph Ibn Shem Tov;

Abravanel's *Shamayim ḥadashim* and *Mifʿalot Elohim* contain detailed discussions of Gersonides' theory of creation and of his astronomy, astrology, theory of time, and theory of miracles.[22] It often seems that such discussions are a stepping stone for Don Isaac to later formulate his own arguments. In many ways, Abravanel's thought on these matters can be seen as a critical interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide* and of Books Five and Six of Gersonides' *Wars*. At times, Abravanel praises Gersonides for his mastery of astronomy and astrology and surely considered him a scientific authority. For this reason, he accepted essential parts of Gersonides' astronomical doctrines, including his criticism of al-Biṭrūji's theory, his adoption of the eccentric model, and his method, as demonstrated by the following passages of *Shamayim ḥadashim*:[23]

> And it was already explained by Gersonides—"how wonderful is his wisdom and how great his counsel" [Isa. 28:29]!—in the astronomical science, in the first part of Book Five of his *Wars*, which he dedicated to the explanation of astronomy, that the new astronomy that was invented by the one who shook [al-Bitrūji],[24] as was mentioned before, is contradicted

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see: Ḥasdai Crescas, *Sefer Bittul ʿiqqarei ha-Noṣrim*, Heb. trans. Joseph ben Shem Tov, ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Jerusalem, 2002), 51–55; Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), 87–90.

[20] *Mifʿalot ʾElohim* 10:12, pp. 96b–99a. In this passage Abravanel juxtaposes Maimonides', Crescas's, and Gersonides' conceptions of prophecy.

[21] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, 64 and. 69. Cf. *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 2:4, pp. 101–104 (trans. Feldman, 2: 42–47). But see also Alexander Altman, "Gersonides' Commentary on Averroes' Epitome of "Parva Naturalia," 11.3, Annotated Critical Edition / באור ספר החוש והמוחש קצור," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 46/47 (1979–1980): 9–31, on 24–25.

[22] See Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil* (New York, 2003).

[23] On Gersonides' account of al-Bitrūji's astronomy, see Ruth Glasner, "The Early Stages in the Evolution of Gersonides' The Wars of the Lord," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87 (1996): 1–46.

[24] Abravanel refers to al-Bitrūji, using a cognomen that combines those of Gersonides (*baʿal tek̲unah ḥadašah*) and Isaac Israeli (Toledo, fourteenth century) (*ha-marʿish*). See: Bernard R. Goldstein, *Al-Bitrūji: On the Principles of Astronomy* (New Haven, 1971), 40–43; Gad Freudenthal, "Human Felicity and Astronomy: Gersonides' Revolt against Ptolemy," *Daʿat* 22 (1989): 55–72, on 66 (Heb.); James T. Robinson, "The First References in Hebrew to al-Bitrūji's 'On the Principles of Astronomy'," *Aleph* 3 (2003): 145–164, on 148.

> by investigation and by the senses. And there [*Wars* 5:1:44] Gersonides presented many arguments in order to refute him.[25]

On the same page, we find a fine example of Abravanel's understanding and adoption of Gersonides methodological commitment to "reality"—i.e. empirical observations as superior to mere prior "opinions":

> [...] and if reality does not agree with this astronomy [of al-Bitrūji], it is not right to accept it, for this is [the reason for] Maimonides' rejection of Aristotle's view. Now, as for the senses, Gersonides has already mentioned, in the aforementioned place [*Wars* 5:1:44], that the existence of an eccentric sphere is confirmed by the senses and that [there are also] other things in which reality does not agree with the astronomy [of al-Biṭrūji]. This is why the astronomer himself [al-Biṭrūji], being aware of the fact that the senses are much at variance with his astronomy, argued that we should not rely on the senses, for the senses are deceptive in many cases, and that it is not appropriate to reject theory[26] on account of [the senses].[27]

It is not surprising to find such clear support of empirical observation coming from Don Isaac's pen. On many other occasions in his biblical commentaries he corroborates his interpretation by observations he made. The most famous example of this is his rejection of monarchical political theory in his commentary on 1Samuel 8, partly on the basis of the empirical and historical observation of contemporary and ancient republics.[28] Abravanel even expresses a certain enthusiasm for Gersonides' attempts to formulate the fundamental principles (*shorashim*) of astrology as a scientific field. In *Wars* 5:2:8 Gersonides expounds six principles that provide a formal scientific structure and basis for astrology.[29] Relying on them, Gersonides considered it possible to propose scientific answers to twenty-seven important astronomical and astrophysical *quaesita* (*derushim*) (*Wars*, 5:2: 7, 9). In *Shamayim ḥadashim*, Abravanel refers to these investigations and principles and describes them as follows:

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[25] Abravanel, *Shamayim ḥadashim*, 24a.

[26] Here "theory" means Aristotle's principles of motion (all circular motions occur around one immobile center, etc.). See Aristotle, *De caelo*, II:3, 286^{a}12–21; II:14, 296^{b}21–24. For an excellent critical presentation of Aristotle's principles, see Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:24; trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), 322–327.

[27] Abravanel, *Shamayim ḥadashim*, 24b.

[28] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 206a: "Indeed, why offer theoretical arguments when the philosopher taught us that experience overweighs inference. Look and see the countries that are governed by kings, … and today, we see several countries governed by magistrates and temporary rulers chosen among them every three months, and God the king is with them."

> […] the twenty-seven precious questions and investigations "are all plain to whom understands" [Prov. 8:9]; next he [Gersonides] posited the six principles, which are true in themselves and "correct to those who find knowledge" [ibid.], and provided answers to all these inquiries.[30]

This brief survey of Abravanel's multifaceted responses to Gersonides' work clearly demonstrates that Don Isaac's attitude cannot be reduced to a simple antagonism between clear philosophical and theological positions.

2.2 *Two Social and Intellectual Figures: Don Isaac vs. Magister Leo*

The two seemingly conflicting features of Abravanel's attitude towards Gersonides—antagonism and deep appreciation—can be better understood if we take account of Gersonides' and especially Abravanel's social and intellectual profiles. Occasionally Abravanel mentions the fact that he "did not study astronomy"[31] and that he admired Gersonides for his exceptional knowledge in this field. This gap in scientific knowledge is closely related to Abravanel's social background, as we may learn from a passage in the introduction to his first opus, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, written in late 1460. There, Don Isaac compares his social position, as the son of a leading Portuguese Jewish merchant and financier, with the social and intellectual position of a Jewish philosopher and scholar like Maimonides:

> I was afraid because I am naked (Gen. 3:10), without the clothes of wisdom. … I have already been cast out (Jon. 2:5) from study [contemplation] and become a fugitive and wanderer on the earth (Gen. 4:14), now in the streets, now in the market (Prov. 7:12), I go about with the merchants (Gen. 23:16). […] Hence everyone who heard [my criticism of Maimonides] would laugh at me (Gen. 21:6).[32]

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[29] Cf. Tzvi Langermann, "Gersonides on Astrology," in *The Wars of The Lord*, trans. Feldman, 3: 506–519, on 509–510; Ruth Glasner, *Gersonides. A Portrait of a Fourteenth-Century Philosopher-Scientist* (Oxford, 2015), 91–94.

[30] Abravanel, *Shamayim ḥadashim*, 25b.

[31] *Peruš ha-Torah le-rabbeinu Yiṣḥaq Abarbanel*, ed. A. Shotand (Jerusalem, 1999), 81.

[32] *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, Preface, 28.

To understand Abravanel's self-image as a merchant, we should note his allusion to Adam's discovery of his own nakedness after the sin in order to represent his inferiority in learning and knowledge to the great authorities of the rabbinical and scientific elite, especially Maimonides. Just after the verb נגרשתי ("I was cast out"), he quotes Cain's plaint about his fate, followed by the biblical expression עובר לסוחר (here "go about with the merchants"; but in the original context with the sense of "at the going merchants' rate"), to describe his life as a merchant and tax farmer as one of constant travel. Abravanel considered the life of an itinerant trader as clearly opposed to the stability necessary for contemplation and study. It follows that Don Isaac was conscious that his knowledge was not commensurate with that of a professional scientist or philosopher, but was only that of a well-educated merchant and courtier.

If Don Isaac often complained that the "travels always came as a whirlwind, scattering me away from the gates of study,"[33] one could perhaps say that Gersonides spent most of his life inside those gates. Gersonides never left Provence; while he was living in Orange, with occasional visits to Avignon, he seems to have supported himself through the local wine trade or by moneylending.[34] Ruth Glasner has called attention to some indications supporting the possibility that Gersonides took on some students or even stood as a head of a philosophical-Averroean "school."[35] It is also reasonable to assume that he dedicated much time to looking up at the heavens and observing the stars. Astronomical observations clearly required a much more "static" way of life than Don Isaac's political, financial, and international trade career.[36]

Gersonides and Isaac Abravanel were both members of the Jewish elite, albeit in different ways. But whereas we have little information about Gersonides' family and life,[37] we know Abravanel was the son of an old Castilian family of well-educated merchants, tax farmers, and communal leaders, and was himself the tax farmer for two aristocratic Iberian families, the Braganças and the Mendozas. Gersonides' works and their Latin translations refer to different Christian personalities, such as Philippe de Vitri and Pope Clement VI, who showed interest in his astronomical, astrological, and mathematical work and probably supported it financially.[38] Thus Gersonides' and Abravanel's positions within Christian and Jewish society resulted from very different kinds of expertise and familial traditions.

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[33] Cedric Cohen Skalli, ed., *Isaac Abravanel: Letters* (Berlin, 2007), 122–123.

[34] Joseph Shatzmiller, "Gersonides and the Jewish Community of Orange in his Day," in *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 2 (Haifa, 1972): 111–126 (Heb.); idem, "Some Further Information about Gersonides and the Orange Jewish Community of his Day," in *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 3 (Haifa, 1974): 139–143 (Heb.).

[35] Glasner, "Levi Ben Gershom" (following remarks already made by Renan and Neubauer).

[36] Cf. Abravanel's counsel to the Count of Faro: "Sir, it is part of the duties of great and noble men to work to improve until death their position …" (Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 96–97). According to the conception of the *vita activa* adopted and formulated in this passage by Don Isaac, men, especially members of the elite, should be guided by a constant effort and movement towards success and achievements. Cf. also the introduction, ibid., 22–25.

[37] On Gersonides in fourteenth-century Jewish society, see. Shatzmiller, "Gersonides and the Jewish Community of Orange in his Day"; idem, "Some Further Information"; Touati, *La*

2.3 *Models of Identification: Joshua versus Moses*

Gersonides' and Abravanel's social functions and positions are reflected, for example, in their respective attitudes to the biblical Joshua. Gersonides depicts Joshua as Moses' disciple in the following terms: "The reason he reached the level of a prophet [was] the fact that he was Moses's assistant [*mešaret*]; indeed, he always accompanied him and learned from his wisdom and his leadership in all his actions."[39] Gersonides presents the transfer of prophecy from Moses to Joshua in terms of decrease. "Israel did not merit for Moses to bring them this success [the crossing of the Jordan and the conquest of the Land of Israel] from Moses. […] They did not deserve that the war be conducted by Moses, but by Joshua, whose power was not as strong [as Moses's], and this is why he was lax in these wars [of conquest], as will become clear in what follows."[40] Abravanel opens his commentary on the book of Joshua with similar comments about the relationship between Joshua and Moses and even quotes a passage from Gersonides' commentary.[41] He continues by expressing his own ideas and develops an interesting interpretation of Joshua 1:2 ("Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land which I am giving to them, to the people of Israel"):

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pensée, 33–48; Ruth Glasner, "Levi ben Gershom and the Study of Ibn Rushd"; Menachem Kellner, "Bibliographia Gersonideana: An Annotated List of Writings by and about R. Levi ben Gershom," in *Studies on Gersonides*, 378–379.

[38] See: the studies of Gersonides collected in José Luis Mancha, *Studies in Medieval Astronomy and Optics* (Aldershot, 2006); Mancha, "The Latin Translation," 21–46; Gad Freudenthal, "Gersonides: Levi ben Gersom," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, (London, 1996), 1: 740–741; Bernard R. Goldstein, "The Astronomical Tables of Levi ben Gerson," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 45 (New Haven, 1974); Goldstein and Pingree, *Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication*; Touati, *La pensée*, 34–58.

[39] Gersonides, comm. on Josh. 1:1, in Menachem Cohen, ed., *Miqra'ot gedolot*, *Yehošua-Šofeṭim* (Ramat Gan, 1993), 3.

[40] Gersonides, comm. on Josh. 1:2, ibid.

[41] Abravanel, comm. on Josh. 1:1–2, in *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 15a.

> Joshua was sitting between the oven and the cookstove, [B Taʿanit 30b] […] grieving over the death of Moses, his master. But God, may He be blessed, informed him [by prophecy] that it is not right to do so. First, because Moses is the servant of God and his soul shall abide in prosperity. […] Second, it is not right to mourn the dead too much. As David, peace be upon him, says [2 Sam. 12:23] "can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." And for these two reasons, God commanded him not to sit and mourn any longer, but to rise and prepare for the crossing of the Jordan.[42]

When Don Isaac wrote or dictated this passage, in 1483, he was himself in a situation similar to Joshua's, on the threshold of the Promised Land. A few pages earlier, at the beginning of the introduction to the commentary, Abravanel described the political drama in Portugal that had forced him into exile. The new King, João II, had decided to revise his father's alliances with the leading noble families and especially with Don Isaac's patron, Fernando II, Duke of Bragança. These families' resistance or even active opposition to the new policy led to a palace occupied by the king, in which he succeeded in killing the duke and forcing most of his family and allies to leave Portugal.[43] Don Isaac was among them.

In the opening autobiographical pages of his introduction, Abravanel relates how he was miraculously saved from the king's evil plan. "And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place (Ex. 4:24) that a man came before me (Dan 8:15) and said to me: come no closer (Ex. 3:5); escape and save your life (Gen. 19:17)."[44] Thanks to the advice of this "angel," Don Isaac fled Portugal in time and found refuge in Castile. In Abravanel's rhetorical prose, this escape becomes a reprise of the exodus from Egypt (Portugal) and entrance into the Promised Land (Castile). "About midnight I went out from Egypt (Ex. 11:4), that is, the Kingdom of Portugal, and I arrived in the Kingdom of Castile at the border city of Segura de la Orden."[45] Don Isaac stayed there, on the frontier between Castile and Portugal (somewhat like Joshua), writing his commentary on the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel and planning his new career in Castilian economy and society.[46] In the last part of the autobiographical text he describes how he overcame his sorrow and anger about what he had lost in Portugal. First, he wrote to King João II. “From the depths of the abyss I cried out (Jon. 2:3), from the place where I hid in the day of the event (1 Sam. 20:19), by means of a letter written by me (Ps. 40:8) I cried out: Help, O King (2 Sam. 14:4)!”[47] Next he addressed God: “Wherefore has God done to me thus (Deut. 29:23)?” Finally, he finds the consolation he was looking for in religious introspection. The commentary on the Former Prophets was conceived as penitence for his past, but also as a means to attract the local Jewish elite to his lectures on the biblical books and thereby reestablish his career in Castile.

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[42] Ibid., 15b.

[43] Luis Adao da Fonseca, *D. João II* (Rio de Mouro, 2005), 59–80. See also Elias Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles in Castile: Dom David Negro and Dom Isaac Abravanel* (Jerusalem, 1997), 46–76.

[44] Abravanel, introduction to the commentary on Joshua, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 2b (translation from Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles*, 56–57).

[45] Ibid. (*Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 2b; Lipiner, 59).

Abravanel closes his autobiographical account with his decision to write the commentary and to overcome his sorrow. “And now I will rise up and do the work of the king (Dan. 8:27), the Lord of Hosts is his name, and write a commentary on these four books.”[48] The formal resemblance between the Hebrew phrasing of this passage (ואקום ואעשה מלאכת המלך ה׳) and that of his comment on Joshua’s mourning (יקום משם ויתעסק בהעברת הירדן) reveals a sort of identification of Don Isaac’s situation at the border of a new country with Joshua’s encampment on the banks of the Jordan, in that they both had to overcome their sorrow over what and who had been lost and then set out to conquer a new land.

Abravanel’s identification with the biblical Joshua involved not only personal experience (escape and the search for a new land of opportunities), but also literary *topoi* to which we shall refer below. This identification contrasts with Gersonides’ insistence on Joshua’s inferiority to Moses. For Gersonides, Moses’ superiority derives from three intellectual achievements: his intellectual perfection, his capacity to isolate his intellect from his other faculties, and his ability to devote his full concentration to the achievements of the intellect.[49] With such an interpretation of Moses’ prophecy, a philosopher like Gersonides could easily see Moses as the ideal model for his own activity. Indeed Gersonides alluded to a certain affinity between his own intellectual concentration (*hitboddedut*) and experiences and those of Moses.[50] For Abravanel, by contrast, Joshua or the judges were better models to identify with.

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[46] Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 33–38; Francisco Cantera Burgos, “Don ‘Ishaq Braunel’ (alguns precisions biograficas sobre su estancia en castilla),” in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1974), 1: 237–250.

[47] Abravanel, introduction to the commentary on Joshua (*Nevi’im ri’šonim*, 2b; Lipiner, 59).

[48] *Nevi’im ri’šonim*, 3b.

[49] *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 2:8, pp. 118–119 (trans. Feldman, 2: 72); Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy,” *Speculum* 42 (1977): 73.

[50] Comm. on Exod. 34:33 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah ‘im peruš raši ve-‘im be’ur rabbenu Levi*

In his commentary on the Former Prophets, Don Isaac demonstrates great interest in Joshua, the judges, Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon as religious and political figures and often juxtaposes their deeds with ancient, medieval, or contemporary political life. It is clear that he felt more attracted to these "intermediary" figures than to the singular and elitist model of Moses. Already his first work, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, defended the honor of these "intermediary" figures, the elders of Exodus 24:9–11, against Maimonides' criticism.[51] In the introduction, he clearly affirms his social identification with these intermediary biblical figures. "Isaac, son of the prince Don Judah Abravanel, a pure Sephardic Jew, I have been very zealous for the honor of the nobles of the children of Israel (Ex. 24:11) and I could not stand the oppression wherewith the older and newer … sages oppress them."[52] As substantiated by this quote and many other passages,[53] Abravanel's identification with this biblical "intermediary" model corresponds to a certain distanciation from the Maimonidean or Gersonidean model of Moses.

Standing at the heart of Gersonides' philosophy is the notion of scientific knowledge as the way to realize the acquired intellect—that is, to attain genuine human felicity.[54] Gersonides begins at least three of his works by declaring or proving that human happiness can indeed be achieved through intellectual inquiry[55]—most clearly in this passage from the preface to the commentary on *Song of Songs*:

> It is evident from the perspective of the Torah and the prophets and from the perspective of philosophic speculation that man's ultimate felicity

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ben Geršom, vol. 2 [Maʿaleh Adumim, 2001], 420); *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 2:6, p. 110 (trans. Feldman, 2: 58). In contrast to Moses' exoteric status in Maimonides, Gersonides does not believe it impossible to approach Moses' capabilities. See Kellner, "Maimonides and Gersonides," 73–74. We should also remember that, unlike Maimonides, Gersonides did not take God's attributes as perfect homonyms, but rather as positive analogies and higher paradigms; see *Wars* 3:3 and esp. 5:2:12.

[51] See: Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 59–82; Kellner, "Gersonides and His Cultured Despisers."

[52] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, Preface, 28.

[53] See for example, *Neviʾim rišonim*, 6a–11b; 56a–57a; 93a–96b; 102a–103a; 106a–108b; 113a–117b; 132b–133b; 162a–167a; 169b–186b; 201a–211b; 213a–221b; 249a–261a; 351a–353a; 388a–401b; 423a–429b; 467a–482b. On this point, see: Cedric Cohen Skalli, "Abravanel's Commentary on the Former Prophets: Portraits, Self-portraits, and Models of Leadership," *Jewish History* 23 (2009): 255–280; Abraham Melamed, *The Philosopher King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* (Albany, 2003), 113–122.

[54] Freudenthal, "Human Felicity."

[55] Cf. Gersonides' prefaces to his commentaries on the Pentateuch and Song of Songs, and the first subject that Gersonides discussed—and proved—in book 1 of the *Wars*.

> resides in cognizing and knowing God to the extent that that is possible for him. This will be perfected through the observation of the state of existent beings, their order, their equilibrium, and the manner of God's wisdom in organizing them as they are.[56]

Such an intellectualist-scientific outlook seems to have been unattractive to a man with Don Isaac's social prominence and at odds with his self-image. Abravanel was not a professional scientist pursuing scientific knowledge, but a financier and community leader interested in political and intellectual methods of achieving wealth, power, and collective and individual perfection.[57] By contrast, political agency and leadership were not central to Gersonides' view of human true felicity or *imitatio Dei*.[58] Gersonides did not develop the political dimension of the prophet along the lines of the philosopher-king. Far from the Platonic-Farabian political legacy, Gersonides emphasized instead scientific knowledge of the universal order (*nimus ha-nimṣa'ot*) and of the future.[59] The absence in his works of any allusion to the social controversy over philosophic studies or to the ban of 1305 (unlike, for example, in the writing of his contemporary Jedaiah ha-Penini) can be better understood in the light of this philosophical choice.[60] While Abravanel wrote his commentary on the Former Prophets in direct response to the dramatic upheavals that marked the beginning of João II's reign and again after 1492, and conceived of most of his works as religious and political answers to the expulsion, Gersonides' work evinces hardly any interest in historical and political events.[61] To a great extent Gersonides and Abravanel invested in different types of knowledge.[62] For Gersonides, knowledge was the only road to human felicity and thus his *raison d'être* as a philosopher in the Jewish society. For Abravanel, knowledge was more of a rhetorical tool to achieve religious, social, and political goals, which could also be reached in part by other means, especially economic and political activities.[63]

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[56] Levi Ben Gershon, *Peruš šir haširim*, ed. Menahem Kellner (Ramat Gan, 2001), 53 (translation from Levi ben Gershon, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. Menachem Kellner [New Haven, 1998], 4). From Gersonides' preface to his commentary on the Pentateuch we learn that like the cosmos, the Torah (including its practical laws and rituals) was created by God in order to direct men to the ultimate felicity. The Torah accomplishes this by means of its lessons in philosophy and the sciences and by guiding human beings in their practical and material needs through its teachings on politics and ethics. For more on the parallel between the Torah and the cosmos, see Menachem Kellner, *Torah in the Observatory: Gersonides, Maimonides, Song of Songs* (Boston, 2012), 18.

[57] Abravanel's discussion of Solomon's wisdom is emblematic of his instrumental attitude towards knowledge; see *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 467a–482b.

[58] Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides on Imitatio Dei and the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1995): 275–296.

[59] W.Z. Harvey, "The Philosopher and Politics: Gersonides and Crescas," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. Leo Landman (New York, 1990), 53–65; Menachem Kellner, "Politics and Perfection: Gersonides vs. Maimonides," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 6 (1–2) (1994): 49–82.

[60] Ha-Penini is known for his *'Iggeret ha-hitnaṣṣelut* (Apologia). See *She'elot u-tešuvot Rabbenu Shelomo ben Adret* (Venice, 1545), 67a–75b. For Gersonides' and ha-Penini's social and intellectual relations, see Ruth Glasner, "Levi Ben Gershom," 53–61 and 73–77; eadem, *A Fourteenth-Century Scientific-Philosophical Controversy: Jedaiah ha-Penini's Treatise on Opposite Motions and Book of Confutation* (Jerusalem, 1998) (Heb.).

3 Abravanel on Gersonides' Place in the History of Philosophy

In Don Isaac's discussion of the miracle at Givon (Joshua 10), the difference between the two Jewish scholars comes clearly to the fore. Abravanel calls Gersonides "my opponent." He proclaims that Gersonides' conceptions of the "creation of the world—[where] he wrote that a matter which does not keep its shape (חומר בלתי שומר תמונתו) existed prior [to creation]—and also what he said on the soul, on prophecy, and on miracles (אותות ומופתים) are "things that should not be heard, a fortiori not believed."[64] Following these harsh accusations, he informs his readers of an interesting "work in progress":

> In a book named *Maḥazeh Shaddai* (Vision of the Almighty), which I am composing for the people, I investigated all these questions deeply and

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[61] For Gersonides' atypical reference to the catastrophic events and to the expulsion of the Jews from France in 1306 by Philip the Fair, see his commentary on Lev. 26:44–45 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, vol. 3 [Maʿaleh Adumim, 2006] 464).

[62] Abravanel's knowledge was more literary, historical, and rhetorical. Gersonides was a master of mathematics, logic, and the natural sciences, and of Jewish law (halakhah)—a field Abravanel did not touch. Gersonides' tendency for systematization is apparent in many areas of his work, such as his astrology (the abovementioned six foundations) and legal discussions (the nine interpretive-inferences; *meqomot*; topoi). For Gersonides' method of legal interpretation, see the introduction to his commentary on Genesis (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, vol. 1 [Maʿaleh Adumim, 1993] 5–15).

[63] Gersonides acknowledged the political need for rhetoric, but was inclined to see it as a faculty opposed to intellectual perfection and conjunction. According to Gersonides, Moses had poor rhetorical skills, due to his constant intellectual conjunction with God, and therefore needed Aaron as his speaker. See Gersonides' commentary on Exodus 6:9 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* … vol. 2 [Maʿaleh Adumim, 1999] 74, and n. 23, 79–80, fourth and fifth "lessons").

[64] Abravanel, *Neviʾim riʾšonim*, 54a.

> extensively. [...] This is not the appropriate place for this controversy [...]. I know [...] that if we are mocked by our neighbors and have encountered so many evils and troubles (Deut. 31:17), the true cause for it is the crime of heresy that broke out on our forehead (2 Chron. 26:19). I therefore say: "Are not these evils come upon me, because our God is not within me?" (Deut. 31:17). In that book, I investigated the Active Intellect deeply and extensively [...] and there I argued with Gersonides comprehensively.[65]

In the autobiographical introduction to this commentary, Don Isaac had already used Deuteronomy 31:17 to explain the religious reason for his downfall at the court of João II and stressed the necessity of an act of penance, which took the form of his composition of this commentary.[66] By citing Deut. 31:17, to which he had referred in the preface, to define the commentary as the work of a penitent, Don Isaac indicated that his critical discussion of Gersonides was part of his repentance. He adds that before writing the commentary on Joshua, while he was still in Portugal, he had already produced a "comprehensive" critical discussion of Gersonides' theses,[67] and that his discussion of Gersonides in the exegesis of the miracle at Givon is an abridged version of the larger and more detailed discussion in *Maḥazeh Shaddai*. This means that repentance was not the only motive for the commentary. This might partly explain the historical framework of his shorter discussion, which relied on a deeper investigation of the subject and its different "intellectual" actors. The approach to Gersonides in this portion of the commentary on Joshua is of interest and provides us with rich information about Abravanel's perception of Gersonides' position in the history of medieval philosophy.

3.1 *Gersonides and the* Falsafah *Tradition: On Gersonides' Avicennism as Viewed by Abravanel*

Abravanel viewed Gersonides as belonging to a phase in Jewish intellectual history during which leading Jewish philosophers internalized the conceptions of the later Islamic philosophers. Although Gersonides spent his entire life in Provence under Christian rule, wrote only in Hebrew, and had a rather vague knowledge of the Arabic language,[68] Abravanel's classification of him as belonging to the Arabic-Jewish philosophical tradition might be considered at least partially accurate.[69] The section of Don Isaac's commentary devoted to a critical discussion of Gersonides' conception of the role of the Active Intellect in miracles[70] begins with a clear exposition of Gersonides' historical and intellectual background:

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[65] Ibid.

[66] "Are not these evils come upon me, because our God is not in our midst?" (Deut. 31:17) (*Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 3a).

[67] Abravanel initially referred to this work as *Maḥazeh Shaddai* and then as *Lahaqat ha-nevi'im*. It was probably never completed and is now considered lost. See Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 25, 85, 272 n. 72. Cf. *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, a, 16a, 32a, 54a, 56a, 184b, 218b, 276b, 463b, 499a; Abravanel, *Tešuvot le-še'elot ma'amarim ve-ʿiyyunim be-sefer Moreh nevukim* (Jerusalem, 1967), vol. 3, p. 8c.

> First, I shall say that the opinion about the existence of the Active Intellect as the Giver of Forms is a conception that the later Muslim philosophers embraced, which was followed by many philosophers from our nation. It has really been a "stumbling block" (Isa. 8:14) for the Israelites, for they believed it [the Active Intellect] to be the Giver of Forms and [believed] it to give life to our intellectual soul. [...] They [also] believed that it [the Active Intellect] is the bundle of life and that the reward of the souls is conjunction with it after death. From this it followed for them that they [the souls] unite in it, so that the righteous is just as the wicked. [...] They believed it [the Active Intellect] to be that which exerts providence and oversees the [sublunary] world. [...] They believe it to emanate upon the prophets, making them prophesy. From this it followed for them that prophecy is something natural. [...] They believed the Active Intellect to effectuate all miracles, and that it is not God the Creator who effectuates them. [...] Oh my Lord, what shall I say after Israel turned the words of the Living God upside down [...] affirming that God the Lord, Who is present in the words of the prophets and in the agency of the miracles, is the Active Intellect? Oh shame on the ears that hear in this! Of them it has been truly said: "They have belied the Lord, and said: It is not He" (Jer. 5:12). They replaced His Glory by the last and tiniest of all separate intellects, and they said: "This, Israel, is your God, who brought you out of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4). "Be astonished, O you heavens, at this!" (Jer. 2:12).[71]

Who are those "later Muslim philosophers" to whom Don Isaac refers? Tellingly, the same expression appears in Averroes's commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, on which Abravanel clearly relies in his criticism of Gersonides.[72] There, Averroes uses the denomination "the later [*muta'akhkirun*] Muslim philosophers," directing his criticism against al-Farabi and especially at Avicenna, who understood the Active Intellect as the agent "that gives the forms" to sublunary matter, i.e., as the cause of the existence of the sublunary world.[73] Abravanel considered this idea as *the root* of certain heretical views.

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[68] For evidence for and allusions to Gersonides' knowledge of Arabic, see Ruth Glasner, "On Gersonides' Knowledge of Languages," *Aleph* 2 (2002): 235–257.

[69] See Freudenthal, "Gersonides," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*.

[70] Abravanel refers directly to *Wars* 10.2.10.

[71] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 53a–b; cf. *Mifʿalot Elohim* 10:8, p. 92a. Abravanel repeats the very same words in *Mifʿalot Elohim* 10:8, p. 72a.

As Davidson and other scholars have shown, Averroes's views changed; in his later life they shifted towards a naturalist and immanentist explanation of phenomena such as the generation of plants and animals. In this later view, the generative capacity is found in the semen itself. This implies, among other things, that the process of generation takes place without the intervention of any transcendent agent of forms, but only through the action of the celestial bodies.[74] Averroes's renunciation of the role of the Active Intellect in natural processes matched some of Abravanel's philosophical and theological interests and provided him with a philosophical authority he could rely on. Indeed the main purpose of Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10 was to diminish the cosmological status and role of the Active Intellect—"the last and tiniest of all separate intellects," as he calls it dismissively—in order to recover a more traditional concept of divine providence and miracles. Such a redefinition of the role of the Active Intellect for both philosophical and theological reasons was obviously in complete opposition to its central role in Gersonides' thought.[75]

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[72] Mauro Zonta, *Il Commento medio di Averroè alla Metafisica di Aristotele nella tradizione ebraica, Edizione delle versioni ebraiche medievali di Zeraḥyah Ḥen di Qalonymos ben Qalonymos con introduzione storica e filologica*, v. II/2 (Pavia, 2011), 280; Charles Genequand, *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics: A Translation with Introduction of Ibn Rushd's Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Lām* (Leiden, 1984), 29–32, 47, 172.

[73] Cf. Michael E. Marmura, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text* (Provo, 2005), books 8–9, esp. pp. 331–337; Genequand, *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics*, 31, 108; Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Avicenna's 'Giver of Forms' in Latin Philosophy, Especially in the Works of Albertus Magnus," in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, ed. Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (Berlin, 2012), 225–250, at 225 nn. 2–4. Al-Farabi's opinion is indeed complex; see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York, 1992), 148. For Avicenna's theory of the role of the Active Intellect in the sublunary world, see ibid., 74–82.

[74] Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 232–242; Gad Freudenthal, "The Medieval Astrologization of Aristotle's Biology: Averroes on the Role of the Celestial Bodies in the Generation of Animate Beings," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002): 111–137. See also idem, "Averroes' Changing Mind on the Role of the Active Intellect in the Generation of Animate Beings," in Ahmed Hasnawi, ed., *La lumière de l'intellect. La pensée scientifique et philosophique d'Averroès dans son temps* (Louvain and Paris, 2011), 319–328.

[75] On the theological aspect, see Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides, Providence, and the Rab-

In *Mifʿalot Elohim* 10:8 Abravanel devotes an entire chapter to a critique of Gersonides' theory of the Active Intellect as the agent of miracles and of prophecy. Not only does he insist that God Himself—and not the Active Intellect—is the *immediate* agent of miracles, providence, and prophecy (although sometimes God chooses to exercise His will through the separate intellects); he also questions the very existence of the Active Intellect, or at least argues that its existence cannot be validly derived from the Avicennian and Gersonidean theories:

> But the immediate agent [of prophecy] is God, may He be blessed, [according to] His providence and His will. [He acts] at times by the mediation of one of the separate intellects and at times without any mediator. I have already discussed this subject—its principles and foundations—at length in my book *Lahaqat ha-neviʾim* [The company of the prophets], where I proved that the existence of the Active Intellect, the tenth and last of the emanated intellects, is neither necessary nor true according to scientific inquiry: [it follows] neither from the giving of the forms, nor from the emanation of the intelligibles, and certainly not from prophecy, which it does not effectuate.[76]

Abravanel calls into question the cosmological function of the Active Intellect as the giver of forms, its epistemological function in human cognition as the agent that emanates the intelligibles to the human intellect, and its role in prophecy. According to Abravanel, the theory affirming the existence of the Active Intellect is unsound and there is no reason to posit it in order to explain the functions that Gersonides attributes to it.[77] Don Isaac perceived his

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binic Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43 (1974): 673–685; idem, "Gersonides and His Cultured Despisers." The role of the Active Intellect is not the only subject for which Abravanel employs Averroes's views in opposition to Gersonides. As we shall see later, Don Isaac also accepted Averroes's position on God as the mover of the first sphere. In both discussions, Abravanel placed Gersonides within the Avicennian School. On Gersonides' Avicennian tendency and the notion of the "giver of forms," see Seymour Feldman, "Platonic Themes in Gersonides' Doctrine of the Active Intellect," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn Evan Goodman (Albany, 1992), esp. 261–267.

[76] Abravanel, *Mifʿalot Elohim* 10:8, pp. 91c–91d.

[77] Rightly or not, Abravanel attributes these conceptions to Gersonides' *Wars*: Abravanel, *Mifʿalot Elohim* 10:8, p. 92b. Since *Lahaqat ha-neviʾim* is lost, we cannot say what kind of epistemological theory Abravanel defended there. For the modern debate on the epistemological role of the Active Intellect in Gersonides' philosophy, see: Seymour Feldman, "Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect," *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 113–137; Herbert A. Davidson, "Gersonides on the Material and the Active Intellects," in

approach to the question as partly consistent with Averroes and Aristotle and as opposed to Avicenna, Gersonides, and several medieval Jewish philosophers who followed many of "the later Muslim philosophers."[78]

According to Gersonides' opposite view, semen alone "is not a sufficient cause to generate a soul because it is a homoeomerous part and is not a part of an ensouled [substance] such that we could say that in it resides [some] soul-power."[79] True, semen may contain some heat that is similar to the natural heat of a generated organism, which could come from the rays (*niṣoṣ*) of the sun and the stars. But that heat does not have the formative power required to create the limbs. For that purpose, the natural heat must be conjoined with a formative power, which is not natural but rather "divine." Gersonides here explicitly refers to the sixteenth treatise of *The Book of Animals*, in which—according to his understanding—Aristotle explained the agency of the "divine power" of the Active Intellect in the generation of plants and animals. Aristotle calls this agent "the soul that emanates from the heavenly bodies," while many of "the later philosophers" call it the Active Intellect. For Gersonides, the existence of the Active Intellect is the only true explanation for the "marvelous and wise" and to some extent mysterious way in which organisms are generated. Furthermore, Abravanel's association of Gersonides' view regarding the Active Intellect with the "later philosophers" is ratified by Gersonides' explicit support for them in the *Wars*: "The later philosophers have rightly agreed that the Active Intellect is the agent of the sublunar existents and have called it 'the giver of forms.'"[80]

3.2 *Abravanel on Gersonides vs. the Christian Scholars*

After having criticized Gersonides and other Jewish philosophers who followed the "later Muslim philosophers," Don Isaac draws a sharp contrast with the Christian scholars, whom he praises as follows:

Studies on Gersonides (Leiden, 1992), 195–265; Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 233–259.

[78] This example shows that some of the "problematic" or "heretical" views held by medieval Jewish philosophers were attributed by thinkers like Abravanel to the corrupting influence of Avicenna, and not necessarily to Averroes. On Avicenna in medieval Jewish philosophy, see Gad Freudenthal and Mauro Zonta, "Avicenna among Medieval Jews. The Reception of Avicenna's Philosophical, Scientific and Medical Writings in Jewish Cultures, East and West," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 22 (2012): 217–287.

[79] *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 1:6, p. 41; trans. Feldman, 1: 152–153 (cf. also nn. 13–17).

[80] Ibid., 43; trans. Feldman, 1: 156.

> The Christians, you cannot measure the wisdom of their sages. […] Wise, intelligent, and celebrated people were born to them, who gave counsel and did justice in the sciences of logic, physics, and metaphysics and in all the sciences developed by man.[81] They excelled the eastern sages[82] and there is no end to the books they composed. Nonetheless [i.e., despite their intellectual excellence] they seized hold of the Torah of Moses, the man of God, and wore it as their own crown. And now "pass over the isles of Kittites and see" (Jer. 2:10) if there is among them one man who expressed doubts concerning creation or the miracles? Look what they say about the essence of the soul, its immortality, prophecy, and miracles: is there anyone among them, with all their deep investigations in the sciences, who opens his mouth and shows contempt for the literal sense of the Torah?[83]

Here Abravanel opposes the true beliefs of the Christian scholars to Gersonides' views. He again refers to the issues on which he had already criticized Gersonides: creation, miracles, the soul and its immortality, and prophecy. In this passage, Don Isaac seems to consider Gersonides and other Jewish Aristotelians from the perspective of Christian Scholasticism and its alleged superior synthesis of revelation and reason. Abravanel's criticism of Gersonides draws not only on Averroean sources, as we saw, but also on Christian Scholastic literature.

For example, Aquinas, to whom Abravanel refers as "Thomas, a wise man among the gentile sages and great among their great ones,"[84] may have influenced his view on matters for which he criticizes Gersonides.[85] Indeed, Aquinas rejected Avicenna's idea of the "giver of forms" and Avicenna's theory of emanation, which contradicted the belief in the creation of the world by God's Will without being "dependent upon intermediaries as the separate intellects or the giver of forms"[86]—a subject that is of utmost importance to Abravanel. Aquinas also supported Averroes's later idea that the generation of animals is brought about with the assistance of celestial influences, not that of the Active Intellect. Like Abravanel, he rejected the Avicennian idea that prophecy is a natural phenomenon.[87]

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[81] Here *limmudim* refers to sciences that are human creation. See Jacob Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus linguae hebraicae et veteris recentioris* (Berlin, 1928), 2: 120–122 (Heb.).

[82] *Benei qedem*, "the men of the East," after Job 1:3.

[83] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 53b.

[84] Abravanel, *Mif'alot Elohim* 6:3, p. 46a.

[85] According to Moses Almosnino, Abravanel may even have translated, or at least wanted to translate, Aquinas' *Quaestio de spiritualibus creaturis*. See Mauro Zonta, *Hebrew Scholasticism in the Fifth Century* (Dordrecht, 2006), 20 n. 84. For Aquinas' influence on Abravanel, see Avraham Melamed, "Isaac Abravanel and Aristotle's Politics: A Drama of Errors," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 5(3–4) (1993): 55–75; Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 38–39.

3.3 *Abravanel on Gersonides: Between Crescas and the "Radical" Philosophers*

The division between Christian and Islamic sources is somewhat reflected in the clear opposition Abravanel draws between Ḥasdai Crescas, whom he praises as being among the most "faithful in Israel,"[88] and the heretical Jewish philosophers: "Rabbi Abner [of Burgos], Rabbi Joshua [Moses] Narboni, [Joseph] Ibn Caspi, Rabbi Isaac Albalag, Rabbi Enoch [ben Solomon al-Costantini], and many others."[89] All of them are for Don Isaac people who "make cakes for the Queen of Heaven" (Jer. 7:18). In *Mifʿalot Elohim*, too, Abravanel speaks of a "cursed sect" that corrupted the literal meaning of the Torah (i.e., the creation story in Genesis), which includes: "[Joseph] Ibn Caspi, and [Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn] Falaquera, and Abner [of Burgos], and [Moses] Narboni, and [Isaac] Albalag."[90] Tellingly, Gersonides is not mentioned here, because Don Isaac considers him superior to the rest and deserving a separate and more detailed discussion. Moreover, unlike some of the aforementioned philosophers, Gersonides was not a commentator on Maimonides and was not guilty of what Abravanel perceived as the distortion of the original views of Maimonides through false interpretations.[91]

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[86] Hasse, "Avicenna's Giver of Forms," 226–227 and n. 11.

[87] Aquinas, *Quaestio de veritate*, q. 12, a. 1 and 3. In *Summa Theologica* I, q. 105, Aquinas deals with several theological questions that are very important for Abravanel's discussion of the miracle at Givon, among them: that God is the First Mover; that God can move a body immediately; and that God can act outside the established natural order.

[88] *Mi-šelomei ʾemunei yisraʾel*, after 2 Sam. 20.19.

[89] Abravanel, *Neviʾim riʾšonim*, 54.

[90] Abravanel, *Mifʿalot Elohim* 2:1, p. 12b.

[91] On Abravanel's desire to "save him [Maimonides] from the lions," see *Mifʿalot Elohim* 3:9, p. 26a; cf. also: Jacob Guttmann, *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren*, 8, 34–36, 40; Eric Lawee, "'The Good We Accept and the Bad We Do Not': Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel's Stance towards Maimonides," in *Beʾerot Yitzhak; Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, 2005), 99–117; Leo Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in *Isaac Abravanel, Six Lectures*, ed. J.B. Trend and H. Loewe (Cambridge, 1937), 95–129.

Abravanel defines Gersonides' position vis-à-vis these other philosophers, as he sees it, in *Shamayim ḥadashim*, in a paraphrase on the four sons of the Passover Haggadah:

> My thought bears on four children. One is wise: this is Averroes. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength in philosophical investigation. He was wiser than all the Orientals in [discussing] this question and deciding in favor of the eternity [of the world]. One is wicked: I shall not name him. He is very close to us and is called by the name of Israel. He acted very wickedly by denying the postulate of creation and by believing in the eternity [of the world] and expressing it publicly in his books. […] One is "blameless and upright and God fearing" [Job 1:1]: this is Rabbi Ḥasdai [Crescas], who also intended to refute this thesis [eternity] in order to destroy, at the root, Gersonides' view of the creation of the world, although his [Gersonides'] deeds followed pure intentions and were meant to prove the creation of the world in another way, which was better in his eyes. And one [son] does not know how to ask: this is me. My clan is the weakest in Manasseh [Jud. 6:15] and I am the least of the philosophers of my generation and of the sages of my land [the Iberian Peninsula], which, before God destroyed it, was like the paradise.[92]

In this passage, Abravanel expresses his clear admiration for Averroes, the greatest philosopher. Indeed, Abravanel considered him both an authority and a great challenge.[93] The unnamed wicked son is most probably Moses Narboni, who openly spread his opinion on the eternity of the world.[94] Crescas represents the blameless [*tam*] son: Abravanel applies to him the adjectives the Bible applied to Job, referring to his rectitude and true faith, but not necessarily his philosophical importance, especially inasmuch as his understanding of Gersonides and creation is concerned. It is noteworthy that Gersonides is not presented as the wicked son; in fact, his theory is presented by Abravanel as reflecting "pure intentions." Abravanel's self-image in this passage is interesting. He presents himself as the young boy who does not know how to ask, which coincides with his self-image as described earlier.

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[92] Abravanel, *Shamayim ḥadashim*, 26a.

[93] Ibid., 28b.

[94] Cf. ibid., Author's preface, where Narboni is presented as the most dangerous interpreter of Maimonides.

3.4 *The Inside and the Rind*

Abravanel's reception of Gersonides appears in its full complexity in a later discussion of Gersonides' proof of creation in *Shamayim ḥadashim*. According to Don Isaac, in Book Six of the *Wars*

> Gersonides made prodigious efforts to confirm the creation of the world with many arguments and proofs bearing on the heavenly bodies, time, motion, and the emergence of dry land, and other things. They are all truly firm and excellent arguments, even if there is some weakness and doubt in a few of them. […] But as I studied his words and his numerous proofs, "I have provided me a king among his sons" (after 1 Sam. 16:1), I mean that I appreciated one among them and found it strong, so that we can make of it a decisive demonstration for the creation of the world. This argument is based on the nature of the heavenly bodies and their properties. Indeed, inasmuch as the existence of these noble bodies is lasting, continuous, and changeless, and since in dignity, cause, and place they are prior to the existents that are subject to generation and corruption, and since it will be made clear that these superior beings are created, doubtless it will be self-evident that the universe *in toto* is created, for the other existents that are subject to generation and corruption are emanated from them and follow them. Not that I would accept the view of this philosopher [Gersonides] on the creation of the world as he posited it—I would not even mention it, or speak in his name. But from the depth of the sea—[namely,] the multitude of words of this philosopher, "for they are more than the locusts" (Jer. 46:23)—I will rescue the power and force of this proof to demonstrate the true creation *ex nihilo*, as we have been taught by the Master, the Guide [= Maimonides]. And thereby doing so I shall "eat the inside and discard the rind."[95]

Admiration and rejection are interwoven in this passage. Abravanel acknowledges the influence of Gersonides' proofs of creation on his own thought. He even declares his intention to prove the creation of the world following Gersonides' method and employing some of his arguments.[96] By Gersonides' method, he means the first stage of the latter's proof, in which he demonstrated that the heavenly bodies were created (*ab novo*) by God—i.e. that the heavens are "new." Indeed, the name of Abravanel's book itself—*Shamayim ḥadashim* ("New heavens")—seems to allude to this Gersonidean thesis, as also to Maimonides' critical discussion in *Guide* 2:19. But whereas Maimonides presented only a refutation of Aristotle's theory, and in *Guide* 1:71 declared that a cogent demonstration of creation cannot be provided due to the limitations of the human intellect,[97] Don Isaac thought that by adapting the Gersonidean argument he could present a decisive demonstration (*mofet ḥotek̲*) for creation *ex nihilo*, following Gersonides' epistemological "optimistic claim" in Book Six of the *Wars*:[98]

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[95] Ibid., pp. 24b–25a. The last sentence paraphrases B *Ḥagigah* 15b.

[96] On Gersonides' notion of "resulting from the act of an agent" (*nifʿal mi-peʾullat poʿel*), attributed to anything that has a final cause, and on the characteristics of generated substances (*segullot ha-hoveh*), see above, n. 163, see also Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 45. For Gersonides' proof of creation, see Seymour Feldman, *Gersonides: Judaism Within the Limits of Reason* (Portland, 2010), 28–58.

> Now, it has been demonstrated that if the heavens are derived from an efficient cause, it follows that they are created (*ab novo*), and this proof is free from doubt. [...] Now, once it has been established that the heavens are created (*ab novo*), it has been made evident that the universe *in toto* is created (*ab novo*).[99]

Notwithstanding his expressed sympathy for the Gersonidean proofs, Abravanel could not endorse Gersonides' conception of creation *ab novo* because it was based, so he understood, on the assumption of the prior existence of inchoate matter.

Abravanel himself describes his selective use of Gersonides' work at the end of the quoted passage of *Shamayim ḥadashim* with the famous simile from the *Ḥagigah* 15b: "I found a pomegranate, I ate the inside and threw away the rind," which characterizes the relationship between Rabbi Meir and his teacher Elisha ben Abuyah, the talmudic epitome of the heretic (*aḥer*). Abravanel was both attracted and repulsed by the "Gersonidean fruit" and thought he was able to distinguish between the "good inside" and the "harmful rind." This tension between rejection and attraction, which finds its temporary balance in Abravanel's fragile reformulation of Gersonides' argument, touches the heart of the reception process in which various forces interact and over time dismantle the original unity of the work. Furthermore, as Gad Freudenthal has shown, Gersonides insisted that the posited “body that does not preserve its shape” *is not* matter.[100] Abravanel, like most of Gersonides’ readers, missed this point. Yet we can assume that had Abravanel detected it, he would still have insisted on a pure notion of creation *ex nihilo*.

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[97] Maimonides, *Guide* 1:71; trans. Pines, 180: "… a point before the intellect stops."

[98] By adopting Gersonides' rational approach, Abravanel also separates himself from some of the later Scholastics who considered creation (ex nihilo) as an article of faith alone. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 46, a. 2; Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 40.

[99] Gersonides, *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:1:7, pp. 315–316; trans. Feldman, 3: 250–251.

4 Mediation and Immediacy: On the Nature of Providence

In Gersonides’ biblical commentaries, one can find two connected but different views of divine providence. Gersonides often argues that Jewish history, unlike that of the gentile nations, is not determined by astral configurations but by God’s providence.[101] He repeatedly emphasizes that this providence is ensured by God’s covenant with the Patriarchs and does not depend on Israel’s intellectual achievements.[102] Although providence was indeed initiated by the intellectual conjunction of the Patriarch-Prophet with the Active Intellect, it affects history without being bound to the actual intellectual achievements of Jews at particular moments. It still touches the group [*kelal*] proceeding from these perfect individuals [the Patriarchs] long after their death.[103] But Gersonides also considered providence as a purely intellectual matter and maintained that the Jews could avoid any evil determined by astral configurations only thanks to the intellectual perfection of the prophet.[104] In the next section, we will study how Abravanel formed his theory of inherited providence while rejecting Gersonides’ intellectualist model. Studying one example, we will also outline the way in which Abravanel understood Gersonides’ distinction between Israel and the Nations in the context of exile, redemption, and the interpretation of the book of Daniel.

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[100] Gad Freudenthal, “Cosmogonie et physique chez Gersonide,” *Revue des études juives* 145 (1986): 295–314.

[101] Gersonides, comm. on Exod. 3:1 and 17:16 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, 2: 37, 286–287); *Perušei ha-torah le-rabbenu Levi ben Geršon, Devarim* (Jerusalem, 2000), 26–27 (sixth “lesson”).

[102] Gersonides, comm. on Exod. 6: 2–8, lessons 1–3 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah …,* 2: 78–79); comm. on Lev. 26:44–45 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, 3: 463); Freudenthal, “Levi ben Gershom as a Scientist,” 71–72.

[103] Gersonides, *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:2:14, p. 463; trans. Feldman, 504; comm. on Exod. 6: 2–5, first lesson (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, 2: 78); Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant, and the Chosen People* (Albany, 1995), 174–176.

[104] Gersonides, comm. on Exod. 26:45–46 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, 2: 347); *Milḥamot Ha-Shem*, book 4.

4.1 *Epistemological Imitation vs. Cosmological Privilege*

Abravanel's reception of Gersonides is particularly visible in his debut work, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*. One of its central aims is to prove that Israel—unlike all other nations that are governed by the separate intellects and the influence of the heavenly bodies—is governed by God and not subjected to any intermediary agent, at least in the Land of Israel.[105] Abravanel's argument for a direct and unique link between God and the nation of Israel relies on the ambiguous concept of cosmological privilege (*ḥeleq meyuḥad*). In order to understand Abravanel's argument in the context of his reception of Gersonides, it is essential to first summarize the starting point of Gersonides' investigation of the agent of the miracles in *Wars* 6:2:10, which was also the starting point for Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10.

Gersonides begins from the chain of *epistemological imitation* that runs between God, the Active Intellect, and the prophet. Initially, all three are reasonable candidates for the role of the agent of miracles, in that they all share—to some degree—knowledge of the universal order (*nimus ha-nimṣaʾot*).[106] Nevertheless, according to Gersonides neither the heavenly bodies nor the separate intellects (except for the Active Intellect) can be the agent of miracles (*poʿel ha-niflaʾot*), because only a being with complete knowledge of the universal order can work them. In Gersonides' conception, the Active Intellect is the only separate intellect that knows the order as a whole and not merely part of it (for the Active Intellect results from all the separate intellects together); hence it is the only separate intellect that could be the agent of miracles.[107]

In chapter 12 of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, Abravanel tries to offer an alternative triad and establish a new model of providence, which is based not on intellectual perfection but rather on a direct relationship with God and on a certain "cosmological privilege." Abravanel's alternative triad relies on the tripartite division of the universe: the separate intellects, the heavenly sphere and bodies, and the sublunary world. In each domain, God created a superior being with whom He maintains *direct* contact. Don Isaac's triad includes the First Caused (substance; separate intellect) (*he-ʿalul ha-rišon*), the First Sphere (diurnal) (*ha-galgal ha-rišon*), and the Nation of Israel (*ha-ʾummah ha-yisreʾelit*), which is the superior part of the sublunary world. All other beings in the three domains have a mediated relationship with God through the cosmological order and hierarchy, as explained in the following passage on the difference between the First Caused and the other separate intellects:

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[105] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 63.

[106] *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:2:10, p. 444; trans. Feldman, 3: 474.

[107] In this section Gersonides explains why the Active Intellect—and not God or the prophet—is the agent of miracles. See *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:2:10, pp. 443–453, trans. Feldman, 3: 474–486; Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance, and Dreams and the Concept of 'Hitbodedut' in Gersonides' Thought," *Daʿat* 39 (1997): 23–68 (Heb.); eadem, *Without Any Doubt*, 297–323.

> In the world of the angels [i.e., the separate intellects], according to the opinions of the first philosophers, the preeminent among the separated intellects is the First Caused [*he-ʿalul ha-rišon*]. […] It receives a great part of the [divine] emanation and is the one whose conjunction with God, may He be blessed, is without any intermediary, for it is the First Caused [i.e., emanated] by Him. The other intellects do not reach this rank of perfection and their conjunction is not without mediation; rather, they receive the divine influx in an ordered manner one proceeding from the other. […] [This opinion is true] even though the philosopher Averroes declares in his commentary on Aristotle that multiplicity does not proceed from God, may He be blessed, in the form of an emanatory chain in which one is the cause of the one that is beneath it. Rather [Averroes holds] that from the simple One, may He be blessed, there proceed multiple intellects that differ in their intellections in accordance with their higher or lower degree of simplicity. […] [But] the opinion of the first philosophers is more just and true. Indeed our holy Torah and the sages indicate that the truth is compatible with their [the first philosophers'] opinion.[108]

The First Caused is the only separate intellect that has a direct connection to God. The mediated relationship between God and the other separated intellects is explained by Abravanel with the help of the Neoplatonic theory of the chain of emanation [*hištalšelut*].[109] On this subject, Abravanel rejects Averroes's view and maintains that he follows the view of the Torah and the "first philosophers." Here and in many other parts of his work, Abravanel's use of philosophy does not adhere to the principles of doctrinal coherency and systematization, but rather to a "pragmatic" instrumentalization of conflicting arguments that serve his theology. As we shall now demonstrate, in this seminal passage of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* Abravanel adopts both the Neoplatonic conception of a multileveled emanation process and Averroes's notion of God.

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[108] *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 63.

[109] Ibid., 67.

4.2 *God, the First Cause, Is the Mover of the First* (*Diurnal*) *Sphere* (*On Gersonides' Avicennism*)

In his discussion of the First Sphere, Abravanel devotes much effort to establishing the direct connection between God and the First Sphere—first inasmuch as God Himself, the First Cause, is its immediate mover.

> And in the world of the spheres, it is also clear that there is one particular part, which is superior in perfection, and receives the divine influx from God, may He be blessed, without any intermediary. Even though it [the world of the spheres] includes numerous spheres, none reaches its perfection. [...] Thanks to its great excellence, it [the first sphere] accomplishes in a single motion more perfection than the other spheres accomplish in numerous motions, as has been explained in [Aristotle's] *De Caelo*. Since it is the first among the spheres in excellence and perfection, its mover is God Himself, may He be blessed, without the mediation of any separate intellect. Aristotle concurred with this [view], according to what Averroes understood from him. He [Averroes] correctly understood the intention of his [Aristotle's] words in Book Lām [Book XII] of the *Metaphysics*.
>
> This is true although Avicenna and his followers—among them Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, in his book *The Wars of the Lord*, and Rabbi Moses ben Levi, in the tract he wrote on this topic—believed that the mover of the uppermost sphere was the First Caused [substance] and not the First Cause [i.e., God]. This is an invalid view according to the words of the head of the philosophers [Aristotle] and according to the truth itself, for Nature does nothing in vain. [...] [In addition,] the continuous motion, which encompasses all the other movements, namely the diurnal movement, proceeds from a single conception, which must be the divine, all-embracing conception. [...] It is because of this Mover that the world is called one, just as man is called one because his intellectual faculty is one. It follows that since the form of the world is one, it proceeds from one agent, which is the First Cause and the First Mover, may He be blessed.[110]

As demonstrated, Abravanel adopts the Aristotelian-Averroean notion of God as the Prime Mover of the first sphere. Whereas a few lines previously he emphasized the superiority of the First Caused over all separate intellects on the grounds of the theory of emanation,[111] he relies here on Aristotle's *De*

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[110] Ibid., 64.

[111] Ibid., 63–64.

Caelo and Averroes's commentary on the *Metaphysics* (Book 12)[112] in order to establish the superiority of the First Sphere and its direct contact with God. Abravanel again assigns Gersonides to the Avicennian metaphysical school, together with Rabbi Moses ben Joseph ha-Levi (thirteenth century), a well-known Avicennian.[113]

Before we summarize the debate between Gersonides and Averroes on Aristotle's position concerning the mover of the first sphere, it is worth noting that Abravanel understands Averroes's position as reducing the distance between God and the created world and as abolishing the necessary agency of intermediary entities like the First Caused or the Active Intellect. Abravanel vigorously contrasts God's immediate relationship with the First Caused, the First Sphere, and Israel with His merely mediate relationship with the separated intellects, the spheres, and the other nations. The former is determined by God alone and the latter by God's cosmological order. For this reason, Abravanel thought that this primary divine relationship with the First Intellect, the First Sphere, and Israel contained the inherent possibility of liberation from the cosmological order. The theory of emanation, Averroes's view of God as the Prime Mover, and the traditional concept of God's particular providence over Israel converge in this syncretic twelfth chapter of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* in order to ground God's direct agency in the world and to distinguish God's primary relationship with the superior entities from the cosmological order.

In *Wars* 5:3:11, Gersonides rejects Averroes's notion of God as the Prime Mover and suggests that, contrary to Averroes's view in the commentary on the *Metaphysics* (which Abravanel adopts), it is not necessarily Aristotle's opinion.[114] Gersonides' argument can be summarized as follows: God as the First

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[112] See Averroes' Long Commentary on the *Metaphysics*, in Genequand, *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics*, 170–173. On Abravanel's knowledge of Islamic philosophers, see: Guttmann, *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren* (Leipzig, 1916), 43–45; Ofer Elior, "Isaac Abravanel's Rejection of Corporeal Forms," *Aleph* 12 (2012): 367–402.

[113] Abravanel is probably referring to Moses ben Joseph ha-Levi's *Maʾamar ʾelohi* (Metaphysical treatise). See Crescas, *Or Adonai*, 4:12, pp. 411-413, 1:3:3, p. 114. On Moses ben Joseph ha-Levi, see Freudenthal and Zonta, "Avicenna among Medieval Jews," 232 (with bibliography).

[114] Here is Gersonides' presentation of Averroes's view: "First, since we observe that these movers move the spheres in such a way that whatever is [determined by] the law for existent things emanates from them according to their conceptions [of this plan], it would seem that it would follow that God is the mover of some sphere; for He apprehends the law of the universe. Otherwise, there would be a moving cause that has no activity. Averroes uses this argument in his commentary upon the Metaphysics and proves from it that the mover of the sphere of the fixed stars is God (may He be blessed), and he believes that this is the view of Aristotle" (*Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 5:3:11, p. 276; trans. Feldman, 3: 168).

Cause for existence must have a perfect knowledge of the entire universal order, whereas the mover of the first sphere and all other movers have only partial knowledge, in accordance with the particular cosmological function they serve. Hence God cannot be the direct mover of any sphere, but is the moving cause of all movers together; and, in this sense, the indirect mover of all spheres. Averroes's and Abravanel's argument is therefore unsound, since, from the Avicennian or Gersonidean position, "it does not follow that there is a moving cause having no activity,"[115] and, indeed, "Nature does nothing in vain."

The disagreement between Abravanel and Gersonides on this point derives in fact from the notion of God as the moving cause of the *entire* universe. Gersonides explicitly states that "since the universe in its entirety emanates from the First Cause [God], not just individual parts, it is not appropriate that it be connected with one particular body [*gešem meyuḥad me-ha-gešamim*] through which emanates the order [*nimus*, i.e., nomos] of these [sublunar] existents."[116]

Gersonides denies the existence of a direct link between God and any particular [*meyuḥad*] body, which was crucial for Abravanel's theory of "cosmological privilege" (*ḥeleq meyuḥad*). For Gersonides, the link between God and material bodies is possible only through the mediation of the separate intellects. For Abravanel, Gersonides' cosmological-metaphysical view might lead to a form of divine indifference. Since Abravanel rejected Gersonides' intellectualist model of particular providence, he was forced to present an alternative theory.

Gersonides also makes use of a theological argument that is reminiscent of the Maimonidean view in *Guide* 2:4. Due to God's nobility, it is not appropriate to attribute to Him a cosmological function similar to that of all the other movers. Against Gersonides' Avicennian conception, and the support it found in the *Guide*, Abravanel deploys considerable interpretive effort in order to place Maimonides' "true opinion" within the Averroean camp. He is well aware of the apparent incompatibility between Maimonides' metaphysical-Avicennian approach in *Guide* 2:4 (God as the Necessary Existent that is not the mover of any sphere) and the physical proof of God's existence in *Guide* 2:1, which follows the line of Aristotle/Averroes (God as the First Mover).[117] But for Don Isaac, only the second argument reflects Maimonides' true posi-

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Maimonides, *Guide* 2:4, may be a good source for Gersonides' view. According to Maimonides, Aristotle did not identify God with the First Caused and the direct mover of the first sphere.

[115] *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 5:3:11, p. 277; trans. Feldman, 3: 169.

[116] Ibid.

[117] *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, pp. 74–75.

tion. Abravanel relies on *Guide* 1:70, which defines God as the mover of the first sphere, i.e., as the mover of the "highest heaven" (*ʿaravot*), "by which motion everything that is in motion within this heaven is moved."[118] For Abravanel, this is also the position of the Torah itself.[119] He considered the metaphysical and cosmological requirements of God's direct agency on the first sphere as scientific confirmation of the biblical account of Israel's election. God's direct causality therefore becomes in Abravanel's reading the theological possibility of creation, miracles, and providence.[120]

This immediate relationship between God and the First Caused, the First Sphere, and Israel is Abravanel's reply to Gersonides' conception of a chain of *epistemological imitation* between the prophet, the Active Intellect and God.

> The influence and the providence of the separated intellects, except the First Caused [*he-ʿalul ha-rišon*], and of the spheres, except the outer diurnal one, do not proceed from God, may He be blessed, but are produced only through the intermediary of the separated intellect. In contrast, the case of the nation of Israel, the people holy to the Lord, is not the same. It conjoins God, may He be blessed, without any intermediary between them. God himself, may He be blessed, pours His influx and providence on them without any mediation. With regard to this intellection and influx, the nation of Israel is similar to the first intellect and the first sphere …[121]

Gersonides distinguishes between prophecy and other forms of foreknowledge of the future; i.e., between the prophet's direct *intellectual* link with the Active Intellect and the messages that human beings may receive from the heavenly bodies in dreams and divination.[122] Abravanel's distinction between the direct providence of God over Israel without any intermediary and the influence of the heavenly bodies upon the gentile nations suggests that he considered intellectual communication with the Active Intellect to be a form of astral influence.

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[118] Maimonides, *Guide* 1:70; trans. Pines, 172. For *ʿaravot* in Gersonides, see *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 5:3:13, pp. 289–290; trans. Feldman, 3: 191.

[119] It is also the position of Aquinas, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle 12: L.6*; trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961), 885; *Summa Theologica* 1. q. 105.

[120] In that respect, Abravanel's paraphrase of Maimonides is eloquent: "Moses our Master said: 'The rider of the heavens is helping you, and in His majesty on the skies' (Deut. 33:26). Maimonides interpreted that 'rider of the heavens' means that He [God] is moving the first sphere, and this is what was expressed through the image of riding. Moses said 'in His majesty on the skies,' meaning that it [the first sphere] rides on all the other spheres in its majesty. It means that within the movements of the first sphere, all the other spheres [the heavens] move as parts [of the whole]. This is what Moses called 'majesty.' But he [Moses] called the act of moving without any intermediary 'riding'" (Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 65; Maimonides, *Guide* 1:70; trans. Pines, 175).

[121] *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 67.

For Abravanel, the alternative model is clear. God's providence over Israel establishes a unique relationship that is not mediated by any corporal or intellectual being, like the stars or the Active Intellect. For this reason, it is beyond time[123] and does not proceed from any philosophical preparation (*haḵanah*) or scientific inquiry.

> The fifth principle is that the conjunction [with God] and divine providence are not acquired through rational study and long investigation, but only thanks to God's grace. This is clear because the fact that God, may He be blessed, conjoins Himself with such a vile material being as man is a fact that exceeds the boundaries of nature and is the greatest of the miracles. Therefore study and philosophizing as a means to attain this goal are vain and futile. […] Indeed, philosophical inquiry belongs to man *qua* man, and he resorts to it to train his intellect and bring it from potentiality to actuality. But this conjunction, and even more so prophecy, belongs to man [prophet] inasmuch as he is superior to man [species] and resembles the firstly emanated separate intellect or the uppermost sphere. […] This is why the Torah of Moses contains neither theoretical philosophy nor rational investigations or demonstrations concerning the great philosophical questions. Human perfection is beyond the intellect; it is outside the bounds of nature. To acquire it one needs faith only, upright deeds, and understanding of the matters that the Torah taught us without providing a demonstration of them.[124]

Abravanel relies here on the distinction between a cognitive interaction with intermediate beings in their cosmological order and the immediate relationship with God, defined as an exception and informed only by the divine relation itself. This distinction serves him to delimit the realm of science and philosophy from that of religion.[125] For Don Isaac, who never considered himself a scientist, intellectual perfection is a generic faculty of human beings and hence cannot be used to posit a difference between Israel and the nations. For him, Gersonides might be correct in claiming that science, intellectual preparation, and inquiry are the means for escaping astral determinism, but only as far as it concerns mankind in general, which means the nations. Throughout the twelfth chapter, we see how Gersonides dovetails with the Avicennian school on the question of the mover of the first sphere and how his fundamental distinction between the Active Intellect and the other separate intellects lost its importance for Abravanel. We finally discover that Don Isaac perceives the scientific and theological model of prophecy and providence constructed by Gersonides as exclusively scientific, which cancels out its theological appeal as opposed to the disjunctive model of science and religion.

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[122] *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 2:2, p. 97; trans. Feldman, 2:35; Gad Freudenthal, "Levi ben Gershom as a Scientist: Physics, Astrology and Eschatology," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), 68.

[123] *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 68. The subject of natural time is obviously crucial for Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10 and will be analyzed later.

[124] Ibid., 70.

4.3 *The Angel Michael and History: A Note on Exile and Redemption*

The long Jewish exile led Abravanel to introduce the idea of providence through an intermediary being. In exile, in a period of divine concealment (*hester panim*), the First Caused, which Abravanel identifies with the Angel Michael, volunteers, out of compassion, to watch over the People of Israel on the basis of their shared "cosmological privilege."[126] For Gersonides, in contrast, "the dwelling of His [God's] providence on us, even today in exile, is very manifest," thanks to God's covenant with the Patriarchs.[127] In *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, Abravanel does not refer to Gersonides' conception of providence for the sake of the Patriarchs, but only to his intellectualist approach to providence in his commentary on Daniel. There God's providence over Israel is often presented as accomplished by Israel's intellect, in contrast to the gentile nations, who are under the rule of the astral configuration:

> And Gersonides said in his commentary on Daniel that the Angel Michael is the human intellect and the Prince of Israel [*śar Yisraʾel*], to make it known that there is no prince in charge of them except for their intellect, in its [i.e. Israel's intellect's] conjunction with God, blessed be He, which is not [the case] for the other nations. My [Abravanel's] interpretation is more accurate regarding the literal meaning of the Scriptures. Now it is

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[125] On the distinction between science and prophecy, see also *Neviʾim riʾšonim*, 467a–482b.

[126] This is not the Angel Michael's permanent mission; he will continue to do so only until God redeems Israel. See Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 71.

[127] Gersonides, comm. on Lev. 26:44–45 (*Ḥamišah ḥumešei Torah* …, 3: 463).

> clear […] that the People of Israel is not subject to any astral sign [*mazal*; heavenly body] or prince [*śar*; separate intellect], but to God only …[128]

Abravanel was very familiar with Gersonides' commentary on Daniel and his distinction there between the People of Israel and the other nations. But he replaces the permanent role of the Active Intellect and the function of intellectual perfection in Gersonides' theory of providence[129] with the temporary role that he assigned to the First Caused—the Angel Michael—when the Jews are in exile. For Gersonides, the Active Intellect is the Angel Gabriel or Metatron, whereas the Angel Michael is the human intellect "which receives the influx of the Active Intellect."[130] In Abravanel's contrasting view, the First Caused is Michael or Metatron.[131] This terminological difference reflects a clear disagreement on the status and the role of the Active Intellect and intellectual perfection in divine providence and the redemption (*geʾulah*).[132] In Gersonides' commentary on Daniel and in other works,[133] providence and redemption proceed, in addition to God's covenant with the Patriarchs,[134] from intellectual perfection (redemption) or the influx of the Active Intellect (providence). The time of redemption (*ha-qeṣ*) will indeed arrive thanks to God's covenant with the Patriarchs, but *only* if Israel improves its ways (*ʾim yeṭivu Yisraʾel darkam*) and through intellectual perfection: "And at that time Michael [the human intellect], the great prince, will arise."[135] Gersonides argues further that moral virtues, observance of the commandments, and God's covenant are in themselves insufficient to redeem Israel from its exile. Intellectual perfection and conjunction with the divine are needed as well.[136] God's providence is achieved through the Active Intellect (*be-ʾemṣaʿut Gavriʾel*) only if Israel's intellect is "getting stronger" (*im hayah Mikhaʾel śar Yisraʾel mitḥazzeq be-zeh*), as explained also in Book Four of the *Wars*.[137]

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[128] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, p. 71.

[129] According to Gersonides, the intellectual model of providence is true both in the Land of Israel and in exile.

[130] Comm. on Dan. 9:21: *Peruš Daniel le-rabbi levi ben gershon* (Rome, 1470), 52 (at http://www.otzar.org/wotzar/book.aspx?53537): "In my opinion, according to what we are taught by the subject matter, the philosophical speculation and the Torah, Gabriel is the angel by whose intermediary the prophecies reach the prophets. He is called Gabriel [because] his rank refers to the rank of human intellect as the form and perfection for it [human intellect] to some extent. He is called by the later [philosophers] the Active Intellect and the philosophers called him the 'soul emanated from the spheres.' … The intellect that receives the influx is the intellect called 'Michael,' because he in his substance is poor [מך playing on מיכאל] and bare [i.e., tabula rasa] of knowledge of the intelligibles. This intellect, when it receives the influx from the Active Intellect, is [i.e., becomes] like a form, it is called the 'acquired intellect.' … And this intellect which is called Michael is the prince of Israel, as explained in the Torah, since Israel are not subject to the astral configuration, but are led by divine cognition which conjoins with the Lord, through the acquired intellect, as we explained in Book Four of the *Wars*."

[131] On Metatron as the Active Intellect in Gersonides, see his comm. on Proverbs 1:8 and 30:4. For Metatron as the First Caused in Abravanel, see *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 12, pp. 63–64, and ch. 16, p. 87. On the identification of Metatron with the Active Intellect, see Georges Vajda, "Pour le Dossier de Metatron," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to A. Altmann*, ed. S. Stein and R. Loewe (Alabama, 1979), pp. 345–354; Feldman, "Platonic Themes," p. 172.

[132] For the rabbis, Metatron is angel whose "name is the name of its Master [God]": see B *Sanhedrin*, 38b: "ששמו כשם רבו"; Gersonides, *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 5:3:13, p. 289; trans. Feldman, 3: 190.

[133] Gersonides, comm. on Exodus 26:45–46, p. 347. The acquisition of intellectual perfec-

For Abravanel, providence and redemption derive from God's primary link with the First Caused, the First Sphere, and Israel, and from their essential cosmological role in the cycle of exile and redemption, conceived as a cyclic movement back and forth towards the center of the divine influx.[138] Both Gersonides and Abravanel agree that providence and redemption are not part of the astrological order; for Abravanel, though, intellectual conjunction and scientific knowledge cannot explain the Jews' historical and theological distinction from the nations. He sees intellectual perfection as part of the natural order, and this view underpins his alternative notion of the cosmological privilege.[139]

The redefinition of the relationship between science and religion, the delimitation of divine providence and of astral-natural influence, and the distinction between rationalist models of conjunction and an alternative model of divine privilege are central to an understanding of Abravanel's critique of Gersonides.

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tion (*sheyiqenu ha-shlemut*) is required in order to receive a prophetic message about evil future events that are determined by the astral configuration (*maʿareḵet ha-koḵavim*).

[134] Freudenthal, "Levi ben Gershom as a Scientist," pp. 71–72; Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence*.

[135] Gersonides, comm. on Daniel, p. 72 (eighth "lesson").

[136] Gersonides, comm. on Exodus 20, p. 335: "… as we are in exile because of the sins of our fathers, it is not sufficient for us to avoid shameful actions, but we need to acquire some perfection thanks to which we conjunct with God in a manner which shall deliver us from this exile by miraculous providence."

[137] Gersonides, comm. on Daniel, p. 70, (third "lesson"). See also p. 59:
כי מצד מיכאל תדבק השגחת השם בישראל כמו שהתבאר מדברינו במאמר הרביעי ממלחמות ה׳

[138] Abravanel, *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, ch. 25, pp. 128–131.

[139] Abravanel, *Maʿayenei ha-yeshuʿah* (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 417b. See also Dov Schwartz, *Messianism in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan, 1997) (Heb.), pp. 230–231, n. 82.

5 Abravanel in Portuguese: An Alternative Context

In the previous sections we discussed Abravanel's perception of Gersonides in the context of Jewish and Islamic philosophy, along with key aspects of Abravanel's response to Gersonides' philosophical and theological model. In the following pages, we would like to propose another context of Abravanel's perception of Gersonides, based on a letter that Abravanel wrote in Portuguese in 1470 or 1471.[140] He sent it to Dom Afonso, the count of Faro, to console him on the death of his beloved father-in-law Dom Sancho, count of Odemira. Both noblemen were leading figures at the court of Afonso V and played a key role in the familial and political networks of the Braganças (at the time the most influential aristocratic family).[141] It is well known that Don Isaac played an important financial position in this network.[142] The letter supplements knowledge of Abravanel's well-documented financial activities for the Braganças with important cultural insights into his assimilation of the early Humanist literary genres that were in vogue in elite Christian circles in Italy and the Iberian peninsula. It has therefore attracted the interest of modern scholars since the late nineteenth century.

The Portuguese letter was written only a few years after the composition of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, in the late 1460s, and before the commentary on the Former Prophets (1483–1484). Although each of these three is in a different genre (a philosophical-theological tract and a biblical commentary in Hebrew, a vernacular letter of consolation to a Christian patron), they all reflect aspects of Abravanel's literary activity: his elaboration of the Jewish-Islamic philosophical tradition,[143] his biblical exegesis in the Jewish and Christian tradition, and his epistolary writing,[144] both in Hebrew and in vernacular, in which he adopted several early humanistic trends of fifteenth-century Iberia.[145] So to propose another context for Abravanel's reception of Gersonides, relying this time on Christian and humanist sources, we should worth consider how the same motif—the tension between the notions of direct providence and of astral-natural influences—appears in the vernacular epistle of the early 1470s.

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[140] For the context of this letter, originally written in Portuguese, see the critical edition and English translation of the letter as well as the introduction in Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*.

[141] Martins Zuquete, ed., *Nobreza de Portugal e Brasil* (Lisbon, 1960–1989), vol. 2, pp. 577–578, vol. 3, pp. 66–67.

[142] Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles*, pp. 50–52, 104–116; Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares, *Os Judeus em Portugal no Século XV* (Lisbon, 1982), p. 296.

[143] For a study of this aspect of the work of Abravanel, see: Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles*; Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*.

[144] Mordechai Segal, "Rabbi Yitzhaq Abarbanel as Biblical Exegete," *Tarbiẓ* 5 (1937): 260–300 (Heb.).

[145] Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 1–78.

5.1 *Seneca's* **Hercules Furens** *and King Hezekiah's Prayer in Isaiah 38*

The tension between the notions of astral influences and of direct providence appears most clearly in a part of the letter that, as we shall see, is informed by early Humanist ideas:

> In his letters, Seneca maintains that we must wait for death like a table prepared for a host who, if he does not come for lunch, will arrive in time for dinner, and so on from day to day. In fact, as logicians say, nothing is more certain than death, and nothing is more uncertain than the hour when it will take place. Hence, it is mentioned in the first tragedy [of Seneca] that God was never so inclined towards someone that He promised him one day of life, whereas chapter 38 of Isaiah, which Seneca could not know, relates that God promised to King Hezekiah, when he was at the point of death, fifteen more years of life. He is the only person about whom one can read that he was certain of the number of years remaining before his death. No one else ever received that privilege.[146]

In this passage, Abravanel refers to Seneca's moral epistles, but also to his *Hercules furens*, which was translated into Catalan and Castilian in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[147] Seneca's name appears several times in the letter, as do the titles of some of his authentic or spurious works. This attests to Abravanel's assimilation of the Senequism of fourteenth and fifteenth century Iberian writers, who considered this Stoic philosopher of Iberian origins[148] to be the father of Iberian letters.[149]

Apart from Abravanel's borrowing of this cultural marker, we should note that the passage of the tragedy to which he refers is spoken by the chorus in its first act. It is a reaction to Juno's opening monologue and description of the stratagem she will employ against Hercules. Jealous of this son of Jove's adultery, and challenged by his repeated heroic successes (especially his final labor, the capture of Cerberus in the Underworld), Juno plans to impede Hercules' apotheosis, not by imposing new labors on him, but by propelling his own *virtus* into *hubris* and madness: "Then let him conquer himself too, and let him long to die, though returned from the dead" (116–117).[150] In retribution for Hercules' crossing the boundary of death and mortality, Juno schemes to turn Hercules' own *hubris* against him and provoking him to murder his own family in a moment of madness. "Once the crime is completed, his father [Jove] may admit those hands [of Hercules] to heaven!" (121–122) The chorus, reacting to Juno's monologue, insists on the *fatum* that harshly terminates men's lives. In passage of Abravanel's Portuguese epistle quoted above he is probably referring to the following lines:

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[146] Ibid., pp. 90–91.

[147] Karl Alfred Blüher, *Seneca in Spanien. Untersuchungen zur Geschchichte der Seneca-Rezeption in Spanien vom 13. bis 17. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1981); Sebastiao Tavares de Pinho, "O infante D. Pedro e a 'escola' de tradutores da corte de Avis," *Biblos* LXIX (1993): 268–287; Eleazar Gutwirth, "*Hercules Furens* and War: On Abravanel's Courtly Context," *Jewish History* 23 (2009): 293–312.

[148] His family originated in Cordoba.

[149] On this aspect, see Angel Gomez Moreno, *España y la Italia de los humanistas* (Madrid, 1994).

> The relentless sisters complete each day's spinning
> and do not unwind the threads again.
> But humans, unsure of their own good
> walk into the path of hurrying fate
> […]
> The Parcae come at the set time
> None may delay when bidden
> None postpone the appointed date.
> Once summoned, throngs are received by the urn.[151]
> 182–191

In Abravanel's epistle, the Chorus's observation on man's mortal destiny are applied, slightly modified, to the common natural fate derived from God's natural order. This serves Don Isaac in his consolation of his Christian patron on the death of a relative. Immediately afterwards, however, Abravanel contradicts the chorus when he mentions Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 38:1–5:

> In those days, Hezekiah fell dangerously ill. The prophet Isaiah […] said to him, "Thus says the Lord: 'Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die […].'" Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed

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[150] Seneca, *Hercules, Trojan Women. Phoenician Women, Medea. Phaedra*, ed. and trans. John G. Fitch (Cambridge, 2002), p. 57.

[151] Ibid., p. 63.

> to the Lord. […] Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go and tell Hezekiah: […] 'I have heard your prayer. […] I hereby add fifteen years to your life.' "[152]

Like Hercules, Hezekiah challenged the bounds of mortality, but the result did not coincide with the chorus's reaffirmation of Fortune and human mortality. God hears Hezekiah's prayer, cancels His decree, and postpones his death. In his Portuguese letter, Don Isaac combines two very different literary sources and two diametrically opposed conceptions of death. One (*Hercules furens*) refers to Fortune and its inflexibility, a product of natural and astral causality, the other (Isaiah 38) refers to divine providence and the possibility of modifying the decree of fortune or the natural course of human affairs. Abravanel resolves the tension between the two sources by defining Seneca's tragedy as the norm and the biblical story of Hezekiah as the exception that proves the rule.

Though in a completely different literary context, in Abravanel's Portuguese epistle we find the same conception expressed in *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*: the distinction between the gentile nations, who are subject to the stars or Fortune, and Israel, which is under direct divine providence. The word *privilegio* (privilege) at the end of the comparison between Seneca and Isaiah can be assimilated to the Hebrew term *heleq meyuḥad* in the twelfth chapter of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, where it is the cornerstone of Abravanel's entire cosmological and theological conception.[153] This concept was also the core of Abravanel's rejection of Gersonides' naturalization of the miracle at Givon, which undermines the distinction between providence and fortune. The recurrence of the double distinction Providence/Fortune and Israel/Gentiles in the Jewish context of *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* and the commentary on the Former Prophet, and in the Humanist context of the Portuguese consolatory epistle, leads us to suggest a broader context of Abravanel's reading of Gersonides, which involves both Humanist trends and Gersonides' younger contemporary, Petrarch.

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[152] *The Prophets, Neviim* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 436–437.

[153] Abravanel uses the term *ḥeleq meyuḥad* to designate the privileged part of each level of the cosmos: "The Creator […] did not create each of the three worlds equally perfect; rather, it is clear that in the world of the intelligences, in the world of the spheres, and in the sublunar world, in each one, he created a unique part, much nobler and more perfect than the other parts of the world. And the divine supreme wisdom saw fit to rule it [the unique part] Himself and to bring upon it good and perfection through a strong conjunction, without any intermediary." (*ʿAṭeret zeqenim*, Chapter 12, p. 63). Cf. our discussion above (p. 189) on *gešem meyuḥad* in *Milḥamot ha-Shem* 5:3:11, pp. 276–277; trans. Feldman, 3: 169.

5.2 *Neoclassicism, Neo-Stoicism, Petrarchism*

The literary motif of King Hezekiah's prayer, as well as others found in Abravanel's Portuguese letter, are also present in Petrarch, especially in his Familiar Letters, considered one of the great achievements of early Humanism.[154] These similarities testify to the incorporation reception of aspects of Petrarchian epistolography in Abravanel's letter.[155] In the same passage that contrasts *Hercules* and Hezekiah, we find a link with Petrarch's *Rerum Familiarum* II 1:

> Sir, although humanity feels a great pain upon the death of such relatives, it cannot find in it any just cause to complain [*querella*], because by nature according to the philosophy, and following the sin of Adam according to the faith, we all have an obligation to death and the debt is so obligatory that we should not aggravate it when we pay it. Because, as says Seneca in *The Remedies against Fortune*, we enter life with the condition that we leave it, we receive this soul and this life as treasurers who must account for it. And concerning the collection, there is no fixed time, but when the King, whose officers we are, desires it.[156]

The word "querella," used by Abravanel, also appears in Petrarch's *Rerum Familiarium* II 1, 6–7 (in Latin) in a very similar context:

> The complaint [*querela*] therefore is not about the death of one man, but about the mortality of nature, which introduced us into this life subject to the rule that we must exit at the command of the one who calls us back. […] There is no fixed time in this life. We are debtors without limits. […] We cannot complain about swiftness as if we were asked before term to give back what we owe as soon as we accept it.[157]

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[154] Cf. Francesco Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age = Rerum senilium libri I–XVIII*, trans. Aldo Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta Bernardo (Baltimore, 1992), 1: 21.

[155] On this point, see Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 1–74. Irene Zwiep has pointed out some "striking" analogies between Profiat Duran's *Maʿaśeh ʾEfod* and Petrarch's *Secretum*: Irene E. Zwiep, "Jewish Scholarship and Christian Tradition in Late-Medieval Catalonia: Profiat Duran and the Art of Memory," in *Hebrew Scholarship and the Medieval World*, ed. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 224–239, esp. pp. 226–227. See also Eleazar Gutwirth, "Consolatio: Don Ishaq Abravanel and the Classical Tradition," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 27 (2000): 89–90.

[156] Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 88–91.

[157] Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri I–VIII*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (Albany, 1975), 58. For the original text, see Ugo Dotti, ed., *Pétrarque, Lettres familières Livres I–III = Rerum Familiarium libri I–III* (Paris, 2002), p. 131.

One source of Petrarch's use of the word "querela" here is Seneca's consolatory letter *Ad marciam* 10.

> We have, therefore, no reason to be puffed up as if we were surrounded with the things that belong to us; we have received them merely as a loan. The use and the enjoyment are ours, but the dispenser of the gift determines the length of our tenure. On our part we ought always to keep in readiness the gifts that have been granted for a time not fixed, and, when called upon, to restore them without complaint [*querela*].[158]

The Stoic motifs of the complaint and the loan appear in both letters, by Abravanel and Petrarch, but more significant is that both mean can relate them to their literary source: Seneca.[159] The ability to study, translate, and imitate Seneca, Cicero, and other Roman classic authors, in neo-Stoic and neoclassicist prose, was a major element of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Humanism. By executing his imitation in Portuguese, rather than neoclassical Latin, Abravanel demonstrated his allegiance to the vernacular Iberian Humanism of the fifteenth century.[160]

The tension between divine providence and fortune (or the astral-natural order), which informed much of Abravanel's critique of Gersonides in his commentary on the Former Prophets and in *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* (and his rejection of the role of the Active Intellect), should not be considered solely in the context of Jewish-Islamic (and Scholastic) philosophy. It is also informed by Humanist and Petrarchan trends, as in Abravanel's Portuguese letter. Here Fortune is given a neo-Stoic content, while Providence is assigned a biblical sense (shared by Jews and Christians). As we shall demonstrate, this dualism of Fortune-Providence was expressed by Petrarch in his reading and imitation of Cicero,

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[158] Seneca, *De consolatione ad Marciam, De consolatione ad Polybium, De consolatione ad Helviam*, trans. J.W. Basore (London, 1979), pp. 28–31.

[159] Abravanel refers to Seneca also in his comm. on the Former Prophets (*Nevi'im ri'šonim*, p. 263a).

[160] See Ottavio di Camillo, *El humanismo castellano del siglo XV* (Valencia, 1976); Joaquim de Carvalho, *Estudos sobre a cultura portuguesa del seculo XV* (Coimbra, 1949); Gomez Moreno, *España y la Italia de los humanistas* (Gredos, 1994); Francisco Gómez Redondo, *Historia de la Prosa Medieval Castellana*, vol. 3 (Madrid, 2002); Eleazar Gutwirth, "Don Ishaq Abravanel and Vernacular Humanism in Fifteenth Century Iberia," *Bibliothèque de d'Humanisme et Renaissance* LX (1998): 641–671; Jeremy Lawrance, "On Fifteenth-Century Spanish Vernacular Humanism," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Honour of Robert Brian Tate*, ed. I. Michael and R.A. Cardwell (Oxford, 1986), pp. 63–79.

Seneca, and Augustine, but also in a polemic against medieval Aristotelian philosophy that challenged, among other things, the latter's definition of philosophy and idea of its relationship to religion.[161] In that sense, Abravanel's positive reception of neoclassicist ideas and his critical reception of Gersonides bear comparison to Petrarch's neoclassicism and his criticism of medieval Aristotelianism.

6 *Contra Medicum*: Petrarch, Gersonides and Abravanel

In Petrarch's *Secretum* (1347–1353), *Invectiva contra medicum* (1352–1355), and *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (1367–1371), as well as in several of his epistles, we find many formulations of his Neoclassicism and neo-Augustinianism. The immediate context of the *Contra medicum* is the circles of physicians, Aristotelian philosophers, and scientists who worked at or visited the papal court in Avignon during the reign of Clement VI (1342–1352).[162] They included Gersonides himself and his brother Salomon. As mentioned earlier, at the very start of Clement's pontificate, in December 1342 and January 1343, Philippe de Vitri approached Gersonides during his stay at the court of the new Pope and asked him to solve a mathematical problem. In that same period, de Vitri met and exchanged ideas with his friend Petrarch. Ten years after this indirect encounter between the two, Petrarch wrote the *Invectiva contra medicum*, while residing at the papal court in Avignon, several years after Gersonides' death in 1344 and more importantly after the ravages of the Black Death in 1348.[163] In their edition of Gersonides' *Prognostication*, Goldstein and Pingree have shown that the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1345 inspired great interest and anticipation among both Christians and Jews. It was the background for Gersonides' *Prognostication* and of its Latin translation, made at the request of Clement VI. When the plague struck in 1347, the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1345 became part of a naturalistic explanation for the catastrophe. It is reasonable to assume that this explanation of the Black Death encouraged the scholars of Clement's entourage to pay more attention to Gersonides' *Prognostication*.[164]

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[161] For an introduction to this aspect of Petrarch's work, see Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism. The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla* (Princeton, 1968), pp. 31–62, 173–225; Charles Trinkaus, *The Poet as a Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven, 1979); Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 230–291; Alexander Lee, *Petrarch and St. Augustine, Classical Scholarship, Christian Theology and the Origins of the Renaissance in Italy* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 277–350.

[162] On Clement's attitude towards philosophy and science, see Anheim, *Clément VI au travail*, pp. 225–252, 329–356.

[163] Dotti, *Pétrarque*, pp. 165–170.

As pointed out by Dotti, Letters 7, 8, and 9 in Book VIII of the *Rerum Familiarium* give vivid expression to the plague's impact on Petrarch. Following the death of many of his closest friends, Petrarch describes his solitude and strong feelings about death and the transience of life:

> See to what a small number we have been reduced from so large a group of comrades: and note, that while we are speaking, we ourselves are also fleeing and are vanishing in the fashion of shades, and in a moment of time one of us receives the news of the departure of the other and the survivor will in turn be following upon the footsteps of the other.[165]

The literary, philosophical, and religious expression of Petrarch's grief and mourning was not a direct answer to the catastrophe, but the fruit of his earlier imitations of Ciceronian Stoicism. Death, desolation, solitude, and the loss of close friends did not produce mark Petrarch's *Familiar Letters* with a sense of doubt or crisis. On the contrary, they strengthened his earlier assimilation of how Cicero, Seneca, and Augustine dealt with grief. *Rerum Familiarium* VIII, 7–9 are a brilliant demonstration that his neo-Stoicism is not only the best rhetorical means to express sorrow, but also to cure it.[166]

6.1 *The Danger of the Physician-Rhetorician*

In 1352, just a few years after he wrote *Rerum Familiarium* VIII, 7–9, Petrarch sent a letter to the Pope, in which he advised him to rely on one single physician during his last illness. Knowing that Clement's bed "is besieged by doctors" and quoting at length Pliny on physicians' "inscientia capitalis" (fatal ignorance), Petrarch offers the Pope a prudent principle to be applied to his choice of physician:

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[164] Goldstein and Pingree, "Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication," pp. 4–8.

[165] Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium*, trans. Bernardo, p. 419. It is worth juxtaposing Petrarch's attitude to the Black Death, as expressed in these letters, with the opening of Gersonides' Prognostication: "[Therefore], it is necessary to look at the implications [of the stellar influences] for the future so that [this investigation] will direct men to take counsel concerning evil so that it will not occur, and concerning good so that it will occur, as perfectly as possible. This is the entire fruit of the science of judgments, and in this way it is possible for a man to change what is implied by the decree of the stars, namely, [first,] things related to free will and, second, [things dependent on] divine providence" (Goldstein and Pingree, "Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication," p. 11).

[166] On this aspect of Petrarch's rhetoric of consolation, see Georges W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 30–45.

> For now, unmindful of their profession and daring to emerge from their own thickets, they seek the groves of poets and the fields of rhetoricians, and as if called not to heal but to persuade, they dispute with great bellowing at the beds of the sick. And while their patients are dying, they knit the Hippocratic knots with the Ciceronian warp. [...] I shall stop now by saying that you ought to avoid the doctor who is powerful not in his advice, but in his eloquence, just as you would avoid a personal attacker, a murderer, or a poisoner.[167]

"Ypocraticos nodos tulliano stamine permiscentes": the danger posed by physicians is not only their lack of actual knowledge, but their pretention to go beyond their field of expertise into the domain of rhetoric, which Petrarch views as the medicine of words. For the poet and humanist, physicians were experts in one mechanical art only and could not claim to possess any general knowledge as a result of their scientific and philosophical training.[168] A papal physician who read Petrarch's letter was offended by the attacks on physicians and belittling of physicians' competence. He responded to this slander in a letter, and later a tract, in which he lambasted Petrarch's poetical, rhetorical, and philosophical skills. Petrarch defended himself in a series of four letters, *Invectiva contra medicum* (Invectives against a physician), in which he humiliated his adversary, attacked his scientific and philosophical *Weltanschauung*, and proposed an alternative division of competencies between the liberal arts and the mechanical arts. As Carol Quillen explains, the historical and scientific background of Petrarch's polemic was the rapid development and diffusion of medicine and Aristotelian philosophy in the Italian universities.[169] Petrarch's criticism of the physicians-philosophers and their education was a response to their growing importance in the universities and society and an attempt to repress the rising figure of the physician-philosopher by limiting his expertise to the mechanical art of medicine.

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[167] Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium*, trans. Bernardo, p. 279.

[168] For Petrarch's view of physicians and medicine, see Nancy Struever, "Petrarch's Invective Contra Medicum: An Early Confrontation of Rhetoric and Medicine," *MLN* 108 (1993): 661–666.

[169] Carol E. Quillen, "A Tradition Invented: Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 184.

In the *Contra medicum*, Petrarch's neo-Stoic and neo-Augustinian prose—which has several echoes in Abravanel's Portuguese epistle—rages against a comprehensive scientific conception unifying all fields of knowledge according to the Aristotelian-Averroean model.[170] In opposition to this unified vision of knowledge, Petrarch's imitation of the Ancients was intended to free the liberal arts from their subordination to scientific and technical models. As outlined in the following pages, Petrarch's return to Cicero and Augustine—and in general to pre-medieval models—aims at a greater disconnection of poetry, rhetoric, moral philosophy, and religion from Aristotelian medieval scientific models. In that sense, the broader context and justification of Abravanel's critique of Gersonides' scientific-theological project is to be found in these Petrarchian and Humanist trends, which developed in geographical and historical proximity to Gersonides and were diffused more widely in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries.[171]

6.2 Artes liberales *and* Artes mechanicae

Petrarch sees his polemic against the papal physician as a defense of the freedom of poetry, rhetoric, religion, and moral philosophy from subordination to the mechanical arts. "You subordinate rhetoric to medicine?" he writes. "With unheard-of sacrilege, you subject the mistress to the serving-girl, and the liberal to the mechanical arts."[172] Besides the question of the hierarchy of the *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae*,[173] which on the surface opposes Petrarch to the physician, the *Contra medicum* in fact defends and affirms the autonomy of the liberal arts as a specific field of knowledge and expertise, whose inner logic is independent not only of the mechanical arts, but also of the Aristotelian-Averroean model of science and knowledge in general.[174] Fortune "cannot make rhetoric serve medicine, for she has no power outside her own realm."[175] The realm of poetry, rhetoric, and moral philosophy is the cultivation of literary knowledge and capacities beyond natural needs, and elevates men towards the virtue of freedom. But, for Petrarch, "Fortune should be called mistress of the artisans [artificum]," because medicine, like all the mechanical arts, pertains to the human struggle with the world, its rules, and its contingency. Petrarch defends himself against his denigration by the physician as a "poet" by reaffirming the accepted division between the mechanical arts, which are useful but enslaved to the world of Fortune, and the liberal arts, which free men's thought and soul from subjection to Fortune and nurture their freedom. In his defense of poetry, Petrarch goes even further:

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[170] Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Petrarch's 'Averroists': A Note on the History of Aristotelianism in Venice, Padua, and Bologna," *Bibliotheque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 14 (1952): 59–65.

[171] For an initial outline of this transformation of philosophy and science by Humanist trends, see: Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, eds., *Reinaissance Philosophy* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–59. Charles B. Schmitt, ed., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 57–74, 113–138, 201–300; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 31–229; Cesare Vasoli, ed., *Le filosofie del Rinascimento* (Milan, 2002), pp. 113–132.

[172] Petrarca, *Invectives*, trans. Marsh, p. 14.

[173] Petrarch relies on the medieval distinction between the liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, mathematics, music, geometry, and astronomy) and the mechanical arts (which included medicine). See, e.g., Hugh of Saint Victor, *Didascalicon: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York, 1961), p. 74. For Petrarch, however, only grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and moral philosophy were truly liberal arts, and he often dismisses the other three (especially dialectics) as part of a false and technical understanding of philosophy and the liberal arts. Cf. Quillen, "A Tradition Invented"; Francesco Bausi, "Il medico che scrivi libri. Per un nuovo commento alle Invectiva contra Medicum di Francesco Petrarca," *Rinascimento* 42 (2002): 67–111.

> With the astounding temerity of a lowly craftsman, you condemn these [poetic] fictions and all others of this kind as contradicting the truth. Yet they contain a judicious and delightful allegorical sense which is purposely hidden from you and your ilk. This allegorical sense also abounds in nearly every text of the Holy Scriptures, but I have no doubt that you would like to mock them, except that you fear punishment. […] Why should I be indignant that you dare to challenge me [a poet]? If you could, you would dare to challenge Christ, to whom you privately prefer Averroes. […]
>
> Listen to Lactantius, a man who was famed for his knowledge of poets and philosophers, for his Ciceronian eloquence, and for his Catholic faith, which surpasses everything else. In the first book of his *Institutes* he writes: "[…] the poet's function consists in translating actual truths into

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[174] In the Islamic-Jewish philosophic tradition, medicine was classified as an art and a branch of the natural sciences, which includes both practical and theoretical aspects. See: Sarah Stroumsa, "Al-Farabi and Maimonides on Medicine as Science," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 3 (1993): 235–249; Mauro Zonta, "The Reception of Al-Farabi's and Ibn Sina's Classifications of the Mathematical and Natural Sciences in the Hebrew Medieval Philosophical Literature," *Medieval Encounters* 1(3) (1995): 358–382; Carmen Caballero-Navas, "Medicine Among Medieval Jews: The Science, the Art, and the Practice," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge, 2011), 320–342, esp. 341–342. For a comparison of Petrarch's conception of medicine with Pietro d'Abano's *Conciliator*, see Struever, "Petrarch's Invective Contra Medicum," pp. 667–671.

[175] Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 14.

> different forms using indirect language and figural language with a certain decorum. But to invent everything you write down is to be a fool or a liar rather than a poet."[176]

In this passage, the opposition between the poet-humanist and the physician-scientist yields two opposing attitudes towards religion. Petrarch associates the physician with the scientific and philosophical authority of Averroes, intentionally muddling medicine as a mechanical art and Aristotelian-Averroean philosophy. Moreover, he caricatures the philosophical claim to embrace science and religion as a concealed substitution Averroes for Christ and double-talk. As we have seen, in his commentary on Joshua 10 Abravanel characterized "believers" in the Active Intellect in similar fashion, using the same motif: the replacement of the biblical God by al-Fārābī's or Avicenna's Active Intellect.[177] In contrast to the doublespeak and false religious devotion of the Averroean physician, the poet is presented as the best imitator of the allegories of Scripture and, following Lactantius, as the best defender of religious truth. Because the rationality of poetry lies in its rhetorical presentation or figuration of an existing truth, and not, as in the case of science, in the elaboration of a new and alternative truth, it does not conflict with or seek to supplant religion (as science does), but is more genuine and apologetic. Petrarch's quotation of Lactantius[178] and the few words of explanation that precede it clearly evoke his polemical adoption of the early Christian (Augustinian) assimilation of Ciceronian rhetoric and philosophy against the medieval Aristotelian subjugation of religion, poetry, and rhetoric to scientific philosophy and theology.[179]

6.3 *A Redefinition of Philosophy*

Petrarch's adoption of pre-medieval models also involves a redefinition of the scope of philosophy and its divorce from science or natural philosophy.

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[176] Ibid., pp. 14–15. See Charles Burnett, "Petrarch and Averroes: An Episode in the History of Poetics," in *The Medieval Mind: Hispanic Studies in Honour of Alan Deyermond*, eds. I. Macpherson and R. Penny (Woodbridge, 1997), 49–56.

[177] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, p. 53a–b.

[178] For the Latin text, see Lactance, *Institutions divines, Livre I*, trans. Pierre Monat (Paris, 1986), p. 118. For an English translation, see Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool, 2003), 82. It is worth noting that in Lactantius' text, the passage quoted by Petrarch is preceded by a brief critical remark against a rationalist approach to the mythical narratives of poets.

[179] On the adoption of Augustinian principle "Pietas est sapientia" (*De civitate Dei* XIV, 28), see Quillen, "A Tradition Invented," 197–198.

In the second book of the *Contra medicum*, Petrarch mocks his adversary for claiming to be a philosopher:

> Let us hear what you say, and how you present yourself: "I am a physician." Do you hear this, Apollo, who discovered medicine or you, Aesculapius who enlarged it? "Consequently, I am a philosopher." [...] But at my peril I would go so far as to swear that you don't know what a philosopher is. [...] Armed with these [medical] arts, he claims that he can cure not only bodily maladies, but those of the soul as well. Come hither, all you who are sick! Health and salvation do not always come from the Jews. Here is a half-barbarian savior.[180]

The inference, "sum medicus consequenter et philosophus," was surely obvious for the papal physician and many of his colleagues, Jews and Christians alike, and was based on their scientific and philosophical training. But Petrarch categorically refuses to endorse the unity of philosophy, science, and the mechanical arts. Relying on Augustine, he affirms a disjunction between the treatment of the body and its diseases (the realm of medicine) and the care of soul and its passions (the task of philosophy).[181] Petrarch's grotesque expression "semibarbarus sospitator" (half-barbarian savior) not only ridicules the physician's pretention to be a philosopher, but also conveys the idea that the all-embracing conception of philosophy is a *monstrum*—neither barbarian, Roman, Jewish, Mahometan, nor Christian. For Petrarch, philosophy has to be cured from this malady and brought back not only to its original Platonic definition as a self-gathering of the soul (*Phaedo* 65b–68c) but also to the Augustinian assimilation of Ciceronian Platonism.[182]

Repeatedly citing Averroes as the emblem of a unified conception of philosophy, science, and the mechanical arts, Petrarch juxtaposes the followers of the Cordovan philosopher with simple Christians:

> He [Averroes] is disparaging my God—not his own, I grant, not yours—but my God. This is the God of everyone who, guided by love and hope in another life, travels the safe path to the goal of happiness. [...] What reply to this great man can be made by simple Catholics who will be buried under piles of syllogisms if they enter the contest?[183]

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[180] Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 20.

[181] McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism*, pp. 18–19.

[182] Lee, *Petrarch and St. Augustine*, pp. 277–350.

[183] Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 34.

In this passage, Petrarch associates the philosophical care of the soul with the pastoral Christian care of the soul of believers.[184] He contrasts them both to the dangers of heresy posed by scientific philosophy (always intentionally confused with the mechanical arts). A similar opposition between the followers of Islamic philosophers and the "simple believers" informs Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10.[185] There and elsewhere, Abravanel adopts the position of a defender of Jewish religion and of common belief. Petrarch's return to an Augustinian and neo-Stoic definition of philosophy, against Aristotelian-Averroean philosophy, emphasizes the moral and edifying effect of true philosophical meditation and humanistic study over and against the technical or logical aspect of scientific learning and reasoning:

> You have set yourself a base goal, dialectic, and with the traveler's strange madness [*mira insania viatoris*], you think you have arrived there when you haven't even approached it. […] When you come in the evening, you know nothing. And you won't abandon these trifles until sudden death abruptly concludes the flimsy conclusions that you are pondering [*quam tibi conclusiunculas meditanti raptim mors improvisa concluserit*].
>
> Now, to meditate about death [*illam … premeditari*], to arm oneself against it, to prepare oneself to disdain and accept it, to meet it when necessary, and to exchange with sublime resolve this brief and wretched life for eternal life, for blessedness, and for glory—all these things are true philosophy, which has been simply described as the contemplation of death [*cogitationem mortis*]. Even though this definition was invented by pagans, it belongs to Christians.[186]

The physician-philosopher's quest for learning and knowledge is compared to an endless journey with no finality other than the illusion of achievement and the puerility of syllogism. *Mira insania viatoris*, Petrarch calls it. Scientific activity, caricatured and mocked by Petrarch, does not prepare for death. On the contrary, it distracts men from their mortality and traps them in an endless process he calls "insania." Science is not designed to confront man's finitude and mortality, but to develop syllogistic connections between propositions, dismissively compared to a technical activity. For that reason, it delivers men to death unprepared. This caricatured opposition between *meditatio mortis* and syllogistic reasoning vividly expresses Petrarch's defense of a restricted definition of philosophy, one that rejects the centrality of science and intentionally obscures the medieval Aristotelian conception of the acquired intellect as the true preparation for death and immortality.

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[184] Cf. Quillen, "A Tradition Invented."

[185] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, pp. 51b–60b (see there for how Abravanel perceives Crescas).

[186] Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 35.

Through a neo-Stoic and neo-Augustinian *meditatio mortis*, achieved mentally but also through writing and the cultivation of neoclassicist Latin prose, the true philosopher learns to adapt his relationship to the transient world and his own transient nature. He learns to strengthen his religious attitude to both this world and the next. In this polemical discussion about the sense of the words "philosopher" and "philosophy," Petrarch clearly advocates a restriction of philosophy to moral issues and to the rhetorical and religious apologetics necessary for their realization. In that sense, he adopts the Ciceronian reading of *Phaedo* 63e–68c, which interprets the separation of the soul from the body not in terms of logical reasoning, but of a Stoic exercise to disentangle the soul from any concern for transient objects and move it towards pure concern for itself.[187] Moreover, here Petrarch follows Augustine's Christian adaption of the Ciceronian reading of *Phaedo*, as clearly expressed in the following passage of the fourth invective:

> O mendicant medic, as an expert on nature, you call yourself a philosopher. Is this what you have learned about where true happiness is found? Surely we don't need crowds and confused shouts. … Deep within the soul lies what makes us happy or wretched [*Intus in anima est quod felicem et quod miserum facit*]. Hence the poet's phrase is justly praised: "Look to no one outside yourself."
>
> Now, everyone agrees it is best for the soul to shake off life's hindrances and shackles, and to turn free and unencumbered to itself and to God. … Plato's observation, which Augustine cited and praised, is widely recognized as true. To cite his very words: "We see truth not with the body's eyes, but with a pure mind [*non coporeis oculis, sed pura mente veritatem*

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[187] "For the whole life of the philosopher, as the same wise man [*Phaedo* 67d], is a preparation for death (*commentatio mortis*). For what else do we do when we sequester the soul from pleasure, for that means from the body. … What, I say, do we then do except summon the soul to its own presence (*animum ad se ipsum advocamus*), force it to companionship with itself and withdraw it completely from the body? But is severance of the soul from the body anything else than learning to die (*mori discere*)? Let us, therefore, believe me, make this preparation and dissociation of ourselves from our bodies (*disiungamusque nos a corporis*), that is, let us habituate ourselves to die (*consuescamus mori*)" (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King [Cambridge, 1966], 86–89).

> *videri*].” When the soul clings to the truth, it becomes blessed and perfect; and nothing hinders our perception of the truth more than a life devoted to sensual desires.[188]

Here Petrarch refers to the *Phaedo* as interpreted by Augustine in *De vera religione* 3.3.[189] For Augustine, Plato had laid the ground for the diffusion of the true Christian religion. By decisively separating the perception of truth by the pure mind from the gaze of the body, he allowed the soul to re-orient towards itself and towards God.[190] Relying on the Ciceronian and Augustinian interpretations of the *Phaedo*, Petrarch set the inconstancy of the physician's mind, always turned towards transient objects or patients, to the self-gathering of the soul, which opens men to meditate on mortality and on God. Quillen has noted Petrarch's quotations of *De civitate Dei* (VIII, 1), redefining the Platonic philosopher not only as *amator sapientae* but also as *amator Dei*.[191]

In the two passages we have quoted from the *Invectiva*, Petrarch advocates the disjunction of moral philosophy, defined as the care of the soul and by its necessary instruments (*studia humanitatis*, neoclassical rhetoric, and neo-Augustinian Christian apologetics) from scientific and dialectical philosophy, which—always intentionally confused with the mechanical arts—he holds has nothing to do with the *cura animorum*. Petrarch's humanistic return to the Augustinian and the early-Christian assimilation of Stoicism and Platonism resulted in a separation of moral philosophy from science and in the idea that rhetoric and moral philosophy could produce a better apology for religion than the scientific philosophy and theology proposed by medieval Aristotelians. In Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10, and more broadly in his reception of Gersonides, we have noted the rejection of the Active Intellect and of a certain form of Islamic philosophy (especially Avicenna). Abravanel's rejection of the Avicennian model led him to praise the superior Christian distinction between matters of science and matters of religion. Earlier, we connected this praise to the diffusion of Christian Scholasticism, especially Aquinas's thought. But Abravanel's Portuguese letter allows us to place this disjunction in the context of the Humanist and Petrarchian ideas that inform the epistle.

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[188] Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 74.

[189] *Œuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. VIII. *La Foi Chrétienne* (Paris, 1951), pp. 24–29.

[190] On Petrarch's Augustinism, see Lee, *Petrarch and St. Augustine*, pp. 63–112. Petrarch knowingly omits the scientific and metaphysical aspects of Plato's separation of body and soul.

[191] “But if you want to persuade us, you need to act: for the nobler part of philosophy consists in deeds. When I see you despise transitory things, cultivate virtue, pursue true praise, ignore money, aspire to heavenly goals and abandon rich men's latrines—then I shall believe whatever you wish. As Augustine says, echoing Plato, ‘if wisdom is God, who created all things, as divine authority and truth have shown, then the true philosopher is one who loves God’” (Petrarca, *Invectives*, p. 39). See Quillen, “A Tradition Invented,” p. 186.

Petrarch's recovery of Roman Stoicism and rhetoric passed through a return to Augustine and the Church Fathers and to a more fideist and direct religiosity. As we have demonstrated, this "fideism" and the rejection of certain aspects of medieval Aristotelian philosophy is apparent in Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10 and helps structure his critique of Gersonides.[192] In that sense, Abravanel's openness to Humanist trends and to neo-Stoicism, as well as his rejection of Gersonides, can be seen not only as contradictory or eclectic trends but also as reflecting key aspects of Petrarchism and early Christian Humanism.

The care of the soul, opposed and paralleled to the care of the body, is at the very heart of Abravanel's consolatory epistle of 1470/71, which opens by juxtaposing bodily illnesses (*infirmidades*) and the "pain of death" (*paixão da morte*) felt by the soul.[193] It is also essential in the letter's reference to the complaint (*querella*) about death, in the autobiographical preface of the commentary on the Former Prophets, where Don Isaac presented his exegesis as an act of repentance for his sins, and in his description of Joshua's grief over Moses' death and of the divine call to overcome it.[194] All these passages clearly link the care of the soul with the meditation on death or loss and provide textual evidence of Abravanel's assimilation of a Christian neo-Stoic conception of philosophy as meditation upon death.[195]

7 Conceptions of Time: Naturalism and Fideism

7.1 *The Duration of the Miracle at Givon*

The Humanist *meditatio mortis* in Abravanel's epistle culminates in an insistence on transience, temporality and especially on the present instant as the moment in which the soul can care for itself through rhetoric, inner persuasion, and action.[196] Abravanel's commentary on Joshua 10 does not focus only on the capacity of Joshua's prayer to disrupt the natural order,[197] but also on the duration of the miracle. For Gersonides, the miracle at Givon was not a suspension of the cosmic order but an effect of time, or rather an effect of the rapidity of Israel's victory, which produced an illusion—the perceived suspension of the sun's motion.[198] Crescas, in *Or Adonai*, allows the possibility of the interruption of the cosmic order,[199] but he prefers to categorize the occurrence as a delay (*ʾeḥur*) of the solar motion. Abravanel rejects both Gersonides' naturalization of the miracle and Crescas's compromise, and insists that there really was a lengthy interruption of the sun's motion as well as a different perception of its duration by Israel and its foes:[200]

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[192] Aquinas' concept of fides in the *De veritate* had an influence on fifteenth-century Jewish philosophers like Abraham Bibago. See Abraham Bibago, *Dereḵ ʾemunah* 2:5, ed. C. Frankel (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 227–228.

[193] Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 82–83. See also the introduction there, pp. 14–17.

[194] *Neviʾim riʾšonim*, pp. 2b–3b, 15a–b.

[195] On Abravanel's assimilation of the rhetoric of consolation, see: Gutwirth, "Consolatio," 79–98; Cedric Cohen Skalli, "Discovering Isaac Abravanel's Humanistic Rhetoric," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97 (2007): 67–99.

[196] "One does not need these examples, when one witnesses, through one's own eyes, today

> By my life, I really do not know which of these [two views] is proper [from a religious point of view], whether denial of the miracle, as Gersonides says, or its minimization, according to Rabbi Ḥasdai. Better than both opinions is the one of the talmudic sages. The least of them said that the sun stood still for twice twelve hours. […] And who knows if the miracle was noticed and proclaimed as such during this long duration? Indeed, most people, when in joy and pleasure or in mourning and worried, do not perceive duration rightly (*ʿal ha-ʾemet*). To those experiencing joy and laughter time appears short, and to those who are worried or grieving it seems longer [than it really is].[201]

The passage points to an interesting change in the attitude towards the miracle at Givon—from Gersonides' denial to Crescas's ambivalence and finally Abravanel's reaffirmation of its supernatural status. This movement is clearly one

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the death of one's father, yesterday of one's brother, another day, the death of one's son, or friend, and tomorrow I will die myself. … Why mourn that which cannot be recovered? Excessive sorrow over the past is in vain. Remember yourself, Sir, and now that you have understood this, convert your fame and conscience into an asset, as you would accumulate praises for God." (Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, pp. 94–95).

[197] See also in the Portuguese letter: ibid., pp. 90–91.

[198] Gersonides' comm. on Joshua 10:12–14, in R. Levi ben Gershom, *Perušei ha-neviʾim* (Jerusalem, 2008), 42–46; *Milḥamot Ha-Shem* 6:2:12, 454–460; trans. Feldman, 3: 491–497.

[199] See Crescas, *Or Adonai*, 2:4:3. See also Zeev Warren Harvey, *Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas* (Jerusalem, 2010), 71–74 (Hebrew).

[200] Abravanel criticizes Crescas for having discarded the option of interruption: "Rabbi Crescas, may his memory be blessed, who belonged to the peaceful and faithful among Israel, who brought him to escape from the belief in the station of the sphere and in the interruption of the circular movement and to prefer to believe in the delay of the circular movement?" (*Neviʾim riʾšonim*, 55b).

[201] *Neviʾim riʾšonim*, 56a.

towards a greater disjunction between science and faith. One could say that the longer the duration of the miracle, the greater the gulf between the realms of astronomy and of religion. Looking the *Contra medicum*, we have already shown that this movement towards a greater disjunction was part of the diffusion of Petrarchism and Humanism, which influenced Abravanel's reception of Gersonides.

This argument is not meant to dismiss the influence of other Jewish and Islamic "fideist" sources described at length by modern scholarship.[202] On the contrary, it helps elucidate the Christian context of Abravanel's thought, generally overlooked, and may partially explain the renewed attraction for him of earlier medieval models that severed science from certain religious matters.

7.2 *Time*

It is interesting, and emblematic, that in Gersonides' interpretation the "miracle" was due to an illusory perception of time, caused by the rapidity of the victory; whereas in Abravanel's commentary, a real interruption of the sun's motion results in contrasting perceptions of its duration—shorter for the victorious and longer for the vanquished. Although Abravanel does not refer to it explicitly, we should recall that in the famous discussion of time in book 11 of Augustine's *Confessions*, the miracle at Givon appears at the very heart of the text, to testify to the fact that time is independent of movement and change:

> Let no man tell me then that time is the movements of the heavenly bodies (*caelestium corporum motus esse tempora*). At a man's prayer, the sun stood still, so that a battle could be carried through to victory: the sun stopped, but the time went on (*sol stabat, sed tempus ibat*). That battle was fought and completed in its own space of time (*per suum quippe spatium temporis*) such as was sufficient for it. I therefore see that time is some kind of extension (*quandam … distentionem*).[203]

For Augustine, during the miracle in Givon time was experienced not as a physical phenomenon but as *distentio animi* in the strongest way. The fact that the motion of the cosmos was suspended during the miracle, but not consciousness of time, indicates that time is independent of physical motion. The miracle is the dissociation of time from motion, but also from subjectivity and its *unfolding*—time—from the physical world. This distinction allows the soul to care for itself, but also, and primarily, permits a special connection to God. This Augustinian link between subjectivity and religion plays a key role in Petrarch's Humanism and his disjunction of science from the rhetorical and religious care of the soul. Wolfson has shown that Crescas's idea that "the existence of time is only in the soul" was also concerned first and foremost with allowing a temporal relationship with God, which is not "corrupted" by corporal movement.[204] In his commentary on Samuel, written only a few months after that on Joshua, Abravanel calls Augustine "a great man among the Christian scholars."[205] In his commentary on Joshua 10, he refers to Christian scholars only as a group, but praises them in the most vivid terms.[206] Several other passages of his commentary mention Jerome's introductions to biblical books, as well as Pablo de Burgos's *Additiones* to Nicholas de Lyra's *Postilla*. These references reflect Abravanel's familiarity with Christian biblical exegesis and with Augustine in particular. Don Isaac's articulation of the difference in the duration perceived by the victors and the vanquished echoes a passage of Augustine on the measurement of time: "The impression which passing events make upon you abides when they are gone. That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it."[207] We cannot adduce any textual evidence that Abravanel had read the *Confessions*. Nonetheless, his reaffirmation of the miracle at Givon clearly shares Crescas's and Petrarch's tendency to disentangle man's relationship to God from Aristotelian cosmology. Abravanel's Portuguese letter and other traces of Christian humanism in his commentary on the Former Prophets highlight the Christian and Humanist component in his critical reception of Gersonides, especially his disjunction of religion and science. At the very least, they testify to a certain Christian *Umwelt*, which could give Abravanel the impression that his disjunctive approach was accepted by many.

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[202] For a general overview of these influences, see Guttmann, *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren*. For al-Ghazālī's influence, see Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles*, 60–68.

[203] *St Augustine's Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), 238.

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[204] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, 1929), 289, cf. also 93–98, 286–292.

[205] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 296a.

[206] Ibid., 53b. In the general introduction to the Former Prophets, Abravanel deals with Jerome's translation and division of the Bible into four sections.

[207] Augustine, *Confessions*, 243.

8 1391, Conversion, and Jewish Apologetic

8.1 *Conversion and Destruction*

Abravanel's assimilation of Christian Humanist sources must be viewed in light of dramatic events that affected his family and community of origin. Samuel Abravanel—Don Isaac's grandfather, a court Jew and financier in Seville in the second half of the fourteenth century—had converted to Christianity a few years before the 1391 riots.[208] After the destruction of many Jewish communities in Castile and Aragon and the mass conversion to Christianity that ensued, which thoroughly transformed interactions between Christians and Jews, part of the Abravanel family moved to Portugal in the early fifteenth century.[209] There, Don Isaac's father, Judah Abravanel, rapidly succeeded in becoming a leading Jewish banker and trader at the Portuguese royal court. Don Isaac, following in his father's footsteps, was a leading Jewish financier at the court of Afonso V. This successful integration into the Portuguese economic elite went hand in hand with the assimilation of Christian court culture, as Abravanel's Portuguese epistle of 1470/71 demonstrates most clearly. Nevertheless, Don Samuel's apostasy and the great crisis of the turn of the century had a deep impact on the Abravanels. Don Isaac's Hebrew letters and *ʿAṭeret zeqenim* reflect his strong awareness of his role as a Jewish leader and his assimilation of apologetics for Judaism.[210]

Crescas's letter to the community of Avignon, recounting the riots of 1391, begins with Seville, the Abravanels' city.[211] Towards the end of the letter epistle, Crescas describes the pogroms in Barcelona and the death of his son:

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[208] Cf. Benzion Netanyahu, "The Conversion of Don Samuel Abravanel," in Benzion Netanyahu, *Towards the Inquisition, Essays on Jewish and Converse History in Late Medieval Spain* (Ithaca, 1997), 99–125. For an introduction to the crisis of 1391, see: Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1966), 95–244; Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 2004), 1–64.

[209] For the historical context, see Ferro-Tavares, *Os Judeos em Portugal*, 215–397; Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles*, 46–79; Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3–12; Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 9–11.

[210] On Jewish and Christian aspects of Abravanel's conception of leadership, see: Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3–60; Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 27–82; Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 1–78; Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency"; Aviezer Ravitzky, "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, 1990), 67–90; Abraham Melamed, *Wisdom's Little Sister: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* (Boston, 2012), 272–304; Yitzhaq Baer, "Don Yitzhaq Abarbanel ve-yaḥaso ʾel beʿayot ha-historiyah ve-ha-medinah," *Tarbiẓ* 8 (1937): 241–259.

[211] For the original Hebrew text, see Hayim Beinart, *Gezerot qana ve-toṣaʾoteihen* (Jerusalem,

> On the following Shabbat the Lord poured out his fury like fire, destroyed His sanctuary and profaned the crown of His teaching, namely the community of Barcelona. […] The enemies plundered all streets inhabited by Jews and set fire to some of them. The authorities of the province, however, took no part in this; instead, they endeavored to protect the Jews. […] Amongst the many who sanctified the Name of the Lord was my only son, who was a bridegroom and whom I have offered as a faultless lamb for sacrifice; I submit to God's justice and take comfort in the thought of his excellent portion and his delightful lot.[212]

In his account of the destruction of the communities of Castile and Aragon and the death of his only son, Crescas invests much rhetorical effort in justifying both the royal and the divine power, thus paving the way for a renewed alliance with the king and nobility and as well as for a renewed justification of the Jewish religion and its communal framework. The Abravanel family, and specifically Don Isaac, adopted a similar attitude, fostering new links with the Portuguese Christian elite on the one hand, and developing a defense of Judaism and a Jewish communal leadership on the other.[213]

8.2 *A Critique of Aristotelian Philosophy, or a Rapprochement to a Petrarchian Position?*

Crescas's account of the 1391 catastrophe must be viewed against the backdrop of his criticism of Maimonides' philosophy and its alleged negative influence. In the preface of *Or Adonai*, Crescas defined Maimonides' theological project of unifying science and religion as the last stage in a long process of the descent into oblivion of the Torah's original form and principles. Proceeding from his introductory "When the Greeks attained power and Israel's troubles became more frequent …,"[214] Crescas characterizes this decline as the progressive replacement of the living transmission of the oral and written Torah, first

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1969), 20. For an English translation, see Franz Kobler ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Letters, Letters from the Famous and the Humble* (Philadelphia, 1953), 272–273.

[212] Kobler, *A Treasury of Jewish Letters*, 273–274. Cf. Beinart, *Gezerot qana*, 21.

[213] For a description of these major trends in Abravanel's life and work in the Iberian Peninsula, see: Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3–60; Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 27–82; Cohen Skalli, *Isaac Abravanel: Letters*, 1–78.

[214] Ḥasdai Crescas, *Or Adonai* (Jerusalem, 1990), 4. For a first approach to Crescas, see Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*; Seymour Feldman, "A Debate concerning Determinism in Late Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 51 (1984): 15–54; Warren Zeev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Ḥasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam, 1998); idem, *Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas*.

by a written and textual culture and finally by Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide of the Perplexed*. These works epitomize an external formalization of Jewish Law and the replacement of genuine Jewish principles with the principles of Aristotelian philosophy and science:

> And as for what concerns the fundamentals of the faith, and the essential elements of the Torah and its essential principles, there was no controversy concerning them until the redaction of the Talmud was completed. […] But when the new generations became weaker […] the wisdom of our sages was lost. […] Many of our people pretended to explain prophetic visions and words, secret and inaccessible in their meaning, by means of dreams, vain words, and the [inventions of] the gentile [philosophers]. So much so that our greater sages followed (נמשכו) their words and were enticed by their declarations, […] first and foremost the great rabbi, our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. […] And since the foundation of this error and this perplexity is Maimonides' reliance on the statements of the Greek [Aristotle] and his purported demonstrations, I thought it proper to highlight the falseness of his proofs and demonstrations.[215]

In the opening sentence of his discussion of the Active Intellect, Abravanel describes the negative influence of Islamic philosophy in similar fashion: "First I shall say that the opinion about the existence of the Active Intellect as the giver of forms, is a conception which the later Muslim philosophers reached, and which many philosophers from our nation have followed."[216] Beyond the similarity in the formulation of the argument, what is essential for our discussion is the fact that against the backdrop of the 1391 disaster, Crescas presents a powerful Jewish challenge to Aristotelian philosophy and also invests tremendous effort in effecting analytical disjunction of science and religion (Torah), aimed at defending the Jewish faith and developing a new apologetics for Judaism.[217] This can be paralleled to the crisis of the Black Death and Petrarch's push for a greater disjunction of science from a new Humanist apologia for Christianity, as expressed in his *Contra medicum*. This conjunction of historical and intellectual factors highlights the closeness between the Jewish positions of Crescas and his followers and the Christian positions of Petrarch's early Humanism. Their proximity is reflected in Abravanel's complex shift, in the commentary on Joshua 10, from the Muslim and Jewish "later philosophers" to a new Jewish-Christian attitude towards religion, knowledge, literature, and historical change.

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[215] Crescas, *Or Adonai*, 7–8.

[216] Abravanel, *Nevi'im ri'šonim*, 53a.

[217] For an outline of Crescas' analytical principles of Judaism, see Book Two of *Or Adonai*.

9 Conclusion

Walter Benjamin teaches us that books have a *Nachreife*,[218] a "maturing process" in their afterlife during which they leave their original but limited historical and cultural context in order to take part in a process that is not defined by the intention of the author or the reader. Through their interaction, writers and readers transform the relationships among the times, places, languages, and schools of thought that informed a literary or philosophical work when it was born. Abravanel's critical reception of Gersonides is an interesting example of such a transformation, in that it both disassembled the Provençal scholar's initial scientific and theological project and established new links and interpretations. Don Isaac's critique of Gersonides did not derive only from a historical process within the Jewish intellectual sphere; it also followed Christian and Humanist trends, including Petrarch's development of a Humanist defense of religion, more independent of science. Abravanel's critical reception of Gersonides is an interesting meeting point of Jewish and Christian literary and philosophical trends. In that sense, the cultural and historical processes that informed Abravanel's attitude towards Gersonides helped create the conditions for a belated literary encounter between two great scholars who had lived in the same geographical and cultural environment of the papal court at Avignon: Gersonides and Petrarch. This new connection produced by the reception process is what our comparative study of Abravanel's reading of Gersonides in both Jewish and Christian contexts has attempted to demonstrate.

Abravanel's reading of Gersonides discloses not only new connections, but also a paradigm shift, new sensibilities, and, above all, a reorganization of the history of knowledge. This new historical perspective draws on two "pasts" (ancient literature and medieval philosophy and science) and defines the present through a critique of earlier intellectual models. More specifically, Abravanel's attitude towards Gersonides derives from the comprehensive transformation of the definition of philosophy and its relation to science and religion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; by a change in how medieval Aristotelian philosophy was perceived (on both internal Jewish and Christian Humanist grounds); and by a preference for more direct models of interaction between man and man (rhetoric), between man and God (fideism, direct providence), and between God and the world (Averroes's immanent tendencies, the decline of the Active Intellect). Abravanel's attitude towards Gersonides epitomizes an epistemological and theological evolution and an openness to new cultural trends, but also a return to earlier philosophical and theological models.

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[218] Walter Benjamin, *Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen, Gesammelte Schriften* IV.1, ed. T. Rexroth (Frankfurt a.M., 1991), 12.

Nonetheless, this clarification of the historical background of Abravanel's critique of Gersonides should not overshadow his admiration for the scientific aspect of the latter's work. This aspect became even more prominent for Don Isaac and other Jewish and Christian intellectuals when the appeal of synthetic models of science and religion diminished. Abravanel's appreciation of Gersonides' scientific achievements but rejection of the latter's theological notions and models reflects earlier trends in the reception of Gersonides in fifteenth-century Iberia, but also help fix the prevailing view of Gersonides in subsequent Jewish history. For Jewish scholars of the fifteenth to twentieth centuries, Gersonides was a great scientist but a problematic theologian.[219]

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[219] Manekin, "Conservative Tendencies," 304–306. Manekin argues against the common view of Gersonides as a religiously radical thinker.

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