Authorship in the Age of Early Jewish Print: Isaac Abravanel’s Ma‘ayney ha-Yeshu‘a and the First Printed Edition in Ferrara 1551

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The contributions, over the last twenty-five years, of Moshe Idel, Ram Ben-Shalom, Eleazar Gutwirth, Eric Lawee and myself have shed new light on Don Isaac Abravanel’s relationship to Iberian and Italian humanism, and have begun to establish his reception of Iberian vernacular humanism.1 Relying on recent scholarship on Abravanel, I want to argue that through his assimilation of Iberian humanism Don Isaac developed a new sensitivity regarding the rhetorical effect books had on their readers and the correlative importance of the figure of the author.2 By the correlation between the rhetorical effect of books and the image of the author, I mean first the psychologically influential


2 This sensitivity was implemented in many of Abravanel’s commentaries, notably in the trilogy Rosh Amanah, Zevah Pesah, and Naḥalat Avot, which were published during the Abravanel’s lifetime in one volume in Constantinople 1505. On the rhetoric of this trilogy, see my forthcoming article ‘On a Rhetorical Trend in Isaac Abravanel’s First Printed Edition, Constantinople 1505’, Hispania Judaica Bulletin 5 (2006).
relationship between the figure of the author as conveyed by his book (as a literary personality different from the concrete one of the writer) and the reader; second, the relationship between the writer creating his own image as an author and the intended reader who will be shaped or transformed by the book. This way of influencing the reader’s mind in order to produce a certain image of the person responsible for this change, was of particular concern to Renaissance scholars following Petrarch’s rediscovery of Cicero’s and Seneca’s rhetoric and its adaptation in his humanistic work.\(^3\) The humanists’ renewed interest in rhetoric was part of the new political conception that integrated the impact of discourse and arts as a means of leadership.\(^4\) The revolution caused by the invention of printing in the second part of the fifteenth century yielded new material support – the printed book – for the implementation of the humanistic rhetorical agenda, the printed book being much better tailored to it than the codex, and which soon began to be shaped by humanistic ideas. On the basis of this known connection between humanism and print, I argue that Abravanel’s success in sixteenth-century Jewish print culture, with seventeen printed editions of his works – among them fifteen in Italy – was not a simple matter of taste or commerce, but a sign of the positive reception of his conception of the agency of Jewish books and authorship. This conception allowed, or even called for, a new political and social use of the printed Jewish book. In what follows, I want to present a case study of Abravanel’s notion of book-agency and authorship and of its reception by his printers.

The first printed edition, in 1551, of Abravanel’s commentary on Daniel, *Ma’ayney ha-Yeshu’a*, produced by Samuel Zarfati and Baruch Forte in Ferrara,\(^5\) is indeed a new cultural product composed of three major layers: the biblical text of Daniel; Abravanel’s commentary on it completed in 1497;\(^6\) and the editors’ presentation of the commentary. These three layers are elements of a harmonious rhetorical construction

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Isaac Abravanel’s Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’ā

that intends to maximize the impact of the author on the reader via the agency of a book, resulting from the transformation of the text of Daniel into a commentary and then into a printed edition of this commentary. Although within the limits of this paper no serious comparison can be made between Abravanel’s commentary and classical medieval commentaries like those of Rashi or Ibn Ezra, it is important to emphasize that Abravanel departed from the literary discontinuity implied by the more or less linear character of the Jewish medieval commentary in order to produce a commentary that is in fact a continuous and independent literary work. Moreover, the first printed edition of Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’ā (as well as the two sixteenth-century manuscript copies of it) does not contain the text of Daniel. Indeed, one finds in Abravanel’s commentary several sections which are either a summary of the text of Daniel or ‘translations’ into Hebrew of the Aramaic chapters (Aramaic was very little known in Italy), so that it seems that Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’ā was conceived as an autonomous text and not as a hermeneutic supplement to a biblical text.

Abravanel devotes the first part of his book to a twenty-six-page introduction to his commentary. The length of this introductory part clearly indicates the care taken by Abravanel to prepare the reader for his book and its effect. This introductory part is divided into two sections: first, a long rhetorical piece written in the Hebrew melizah style; second, a discussion of general features of the Book of Daniel and of Abravanel’s commentary. Let us examine the main features of this rhetoric and scholastic exposition of Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’ā by its author.

The rhetorical introduction, or hakdamah melizit, is composed as


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an impressive fresco. It sets out by depicting the historical move of Israel into Exile followed by the subsequent domination of Edom and Ishmael over Israel and over the Land of Israel. Secondly, it concentrates on the Sephardic Diaspora and on its fall from grandeur with the 1492 Expulsion. Thirdly, facing the crisis of the Expulsion, Abravanel presents his commentary on Daniel as an act of leadership that intends to bring his people back from the despair of Exile to the hope for a prompt redemption; his aim is to produce such a transformation of views through the literary medium of Jewish biblical commentary. Without entering into the complex topic of the literary conception of consolation at work here, it is important to stress that the psychological move from depression to hope – which is the inverse counterpart of the historical move from grandeur to Exile – signifies, according to the humanistic theory of consolation, the readers’ recovery of health. So the rhetorical hakdamah presents the book both as the result of the history of Jewish exile and as its remedy.

Explaining his choice of the Book of Daniel for this consolatory mission, Abravanel writes:

I meditated on the books [Dan. 9:2] … And I lifted up mine eyes and saw [Dan. 8:3] Daniel, precious man [Dan. 10:11], who says marvelous things [Dan. 11:36] that bring forth its fruit in its season [Ps. 1:3]. The spirit of the Lord sparkles in him [Is. 59:19] … the Lord anointed him to bring good tidings to the humble [Is. 61:1], and He created [him] a vessel for His work [Is. 54:16], to proclaim liberty to the captives, and liberate the imprisoned [Is. 61:1].

Abravanel presents the choice of the Book of Daniel not as a personal and contingent one, but as the result of a historical and divine process that brought the Book of Daniel to its ‘moment’ at which it both reveals its secret meaning and fits the historical and psychological situation of Israel, represented here by the Sephardic exiles. This transformation of the rhetorical intention of Abravanel’s commentary into a statement about the secret meaning of the Book of Daniel, disclosed through the new historical conditions of the 1492 Expulsion,

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9 Me'aynai ha-Yeshu’a, p. 9a; Perush al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 275.
Isaac Abravanel’s *Ma‘aynai ha-Yeshu’a*

constitutes the very core of *Ma‘aynai ha-Yeshu’a*, whose own relevancy as a book is built through that of the Book of Daniel. It should be emphasized here that the study of passages from Daniel was part of the normal synagogue curriculum in the Sephardic world, generally during the period of consolation after the 9th of Av. Although Abravanel does not mention this custom as being a reason for his choice of the Book of Daniel, it surely played an important role. Indeed, on the eve of the Passover of the year 1496, Don Isaac completed his commentary on the *Haggadah* (*Zevah Pesah*) and a few weeks later *Nahalat Avot*, his commentary of the tractate *Avot*, which was read and studied in Sephardic synagogues between *Pesah* and *Shavu’ot*. Six months after the completion of *Nahalat Avot*, he finished the writing of *Ma‘aynai ha-Yeshu’a*. It seems more than reasonable to believe that Don Isaac, at that time, had in mind to complete a series of commentaries on key ritual texts which would draw the attention of a broad readership because of their ritual background and thus constitute a powerful means of spreading Don Isaac’s virtues as a leader after the 1492 Expulsion and the 1495 ruin of the Neapolitan Jewry resulting from the French invasion.

The rhetorical construction of the hakdamah meli‘it ends with the self-presentation of the author. The penultimate section indeed insists on the virtues of the author and on the political dimension of the book as an instrument of leadership:

I rose up [Song 5:5], I Isaac son of my master [Gen. 24:36] the minister Judah son of Samuel son of Judah son of Joseph of the house of Abravanel, captains of the host of Israel [1 Kings 2:5]

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11 For the dates of completion of these works see Abravanel’s colophons: *Ma‘aynai ha-Yeshu’a*, pp. 139a-b; *Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim*, p. 421; *Pirqei Avot ‘im Perush Rabenu Moshe ben Maimon ve-‘im Perush Nahalat Avot mi-Rabenu Don Yi‘aq Abravanel*, New York 1953, p. 418; end of *Zevah Pesah* (above, n. 3).

12 The popular character of these three works is surely linked to the already mentioned passages of translation from Aramaic into Hebrew in *Ma‘aynai ha-Yeshu’a*. On the French invasion of the Kingdom of Naples, see D. Aboulafia ed., *The French descent into Renaissance Italy*, Variorium 1995.
in Spain, descendant of Jesse the Bethlehemite [1 Sam. 16:1] from the stem of David, prince and commander to His people [Is. 55:4] … On His charge I stand to intercede for His nation in the midst of its darkness and to waken it from the sleep of its exile… I rose early at dawn [Ps. 119:147] and wrote for it [Israel] a commentary on the Book of Daniel, because among the prophets he truly is the one who heralds good fortune and announces salvation [Is. 52:7].

Abravanel distinguishes himself through his aristocratic descent from the house of David and, as an author, through his hermeneutic talent, which enables him to find in Daniel a source of consolation for his people. He presents social distinction and literary ability as emblems of his learned leadership and of his awareness of the humanistic ideal of the erudite leader.

Aware of rabbinic suspicions concerning the speculations about the date of the redemption that are part of Ma’ayan ha-Yeshu’a, Abravanel comes back to his argument of the ‘moment’ of the Book of Daniel, this time not in rhetorical melizah but in an articulate discourse on his own hermeneutic intentions. Don Isaac insists on the argument that, in the period preceding the redemption, the messianic secret allusions contained in the sacred texts, in our case the Book of Daniel, reveal themselves, and thus a messianic interpretation is fully legitimate at that special point:

Alluding to this, the angel said: ‘But you Daniel keep the words secret and seal the book until the time of the end, many will range far and wide and knowledge will increase’ [Dan 12:4]. The phrase ‘until the time of the end’ shows that the matter will be secret and sealed until the coming of the period of the end. Then when the time will come, ‘many will range far and wide and knowledge will increase’, because from the events that will occur during the period of the end men will discern and know the intention of the prophets and their prophecies.

13 Ma’ayan ha-Yeshu’a pp. 9b-10b; Perush ʿal Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 275 (the translation is my own).
14 Ma’ayan ha-Yeshu’a, p. 17a; Perush ʿal Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 283.
The prophetic visions of Daniel conceal the secret of the duration of exile and of the time of the redemption. This secret becomes visible in the text when the historical context reflects it and reveals it to the commentator who discerns the connection between the text and the historical context. Further on in his argumentation Abravanel moves to a more rhetorical explanation of his hermeneutic endeavor:

As it is said, the scholars who determine when will be the end from the words of the prophets – when they do so at the proper time – will vindicate the multitude, because they preserve the nation of the Lord in its faith and they contribute greatly to its hope and expectation in the mercy of God. It then endures the torment of exile by thinking that salvation shall come and deliverance be revealed [Is. 56:1]. From this perspective, the scholars who meditate on this matter [or: investigation; be-derush ha-zeh] vindicate the multitude and thus deserve reward; their actions are before the Lord continually. … Since I think the time of redemption has arrived … it is time to act for the Lord [Ps. 119:126] [and write] this treatise to herald good fortune and announce salvation [Is. 52:7], [though] I do not affirm that what I say in this work is the absolute truth.15

Abravanel justifies his commentary by its consolatory effect on the readers and by his personal appreciation of the historical situation of Israel after the Expulsion. There no longer is any question of secret or divine agency, but rather of a human and literary enterprise which, though fallible, may succeed and bring reward to its author. These are the two poles of Abravanel’s book: the sacred text of Daniel containing messianic secrets, and his commentary with its effect on both the Sephardic exiles and Italian Jewry. Between these two poles is the actual historical situation of the Jews after the Expulsion and the activity of a leader, Don Isaac, who tries to rebuild his leadership and his community after the disaster of the French invasion of Naples of 1495. Hence the rhetorical goal of the commentary is to convince the readership that the Book of Daniel conceals messianic secrets relevant to the aftermath of the Expulsion and, in this way, to create the historical significance of the commentary through the Book of Daniel.

15 Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a, pp. 17a-b; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 283-284.
Further on in the introductory part Abravanel tries to establish the prophetical nature of Daniel’s dreams and visions. For this purpose, elaborating on his former critical interpretation of Maimonides,\textsuperscript{16} Don Isaac describes the process of the prophetical dream as following:

The second level of prophecy is when the [divine] emanation first reaches the intellect of the prophet and then by its mediation the imaginative faculty … When the emanation reaches the intellect of the prophet, he at times does not discern its reception because of the profoundness of the subject of apprehension and the limitation of the apprehender … For this reason the emanation of the intellect spreads to the imaginative faculty, inscribing in it forms and images that are parables and enigmas related to the content [of the emanation] in the intellect. The prophet discerns only this apprehension [that is, the one reaching the imagination] … Such a level of prophecy, whether it be in a dream [while asleep] or vision [while awake], necessitates the suspension of the senses, for the activity of the imagination and its dealing with the emanation that reaches it, preoccupies the entire soul in a manner that suspends the activities of the senses.\textsuperscript{17}

The expansion of the divine emanation from the intellect to the imaginative faculty provokes the creation of a complex of images related to the intellectual content of the flow which first was not understood by the intellect of the prophet. This creation of imaginative forms cancels the normal sensual perception, but more important, it calls for an interpretative capacity on the part of the prophet, or the commentator, in order to extract the meaning from the forms. The second type of prophetical perceptions that characterizes the Book of Daniel is Daniel’s visions, which Abravanel explains as follows:


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Mi‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘a}, pp. 27a-b; \textit{Perush \‘al Nevim u-Ketuvim}, p. 294.
Isaac Abravanel’s Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a

The third level of prophecy is when the emanation which first reaches the soul [intellect] of the prophet, spreads from it to the imaginative faculty, and then continues to the external senses. The prophet discerns it only with his sensory perception, in a manner that he sees with his eyes and hears with his ears divine objects of perception which do not exist in the material world.18

This time, the divine emanation does not stop at the imagination; it goes on to the senses, provoking an actual sensory perception of ‘divine’ objects which, like dreams, require interpretation. Indeed, Abravanel insists in his commentary on the first section of the Book of Daniel that Daniel has been given a special divine wisdom allowing him to perfectly interpret dreams and visions: ‘Daniel had a special virtue … an extraordinary knowledge of the solution of the dreams that man sees in his sleep’.19

Moreover, Abravanel affirms that Daniel’s dreams and visions distinguish themselves from natural dreams or visions by the fact that they are not simply redundant reflections of his environment and of his time, but of the major stages of Jewish exile until the redemption:

Although the veridical dream is something natural according to the preparedness of the dreamer and his temperament [physical disposition], it is already clear that sometimes attached to it [the dream] is an emanation arranged by God for some given purpose that will cause a person to dream of things that are still very remote … Just as many times this divine matter becomes attached to dreams causing a person to dream in such a manner – that is, a dream that is true in all its details – so as to its interpretation, it will be perfect in all its details only in the case of the interpreter who is inspired by the divine spirit.20

This conception of the prophetical dream has implications for the interpretation of the Book of Daniel. If Daniel’s dreams and visions are prophetical, the true interpretation shows how each detail is indeed

18 Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a, p. 27b; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 294.
19 Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a, p. 35a; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 303.
20 Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a, pp. 35b-36a; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 304.
an imaginative representation of a prophecy that has already been fulfilled or will later be fulfilled. If the prophetic vision is the imaginative or sensory visualization of a divine prophetic knowledge, the art of commentary is the literary ability to convert the images and narratives of the visions into a historical and realistic narrative that convinces the reader of the prophetical nature of the Book of Daniel. Here we approach the very essence of Abravanel’s commentary and of what he considered the heart of the Book of Daniel. Abravanel reveals this double core of the Book of Daniel and of his commentary in the last section of the introductory part:

Why did God cause prophetic visions to emanate upon Daniel … At the time of His punishing them [Israel] for their deeds it was His will to inform them that the evil that befalls them was not the necessary consequence of matter, nor the result of the celestial system or the vicissitudes of fortune, but it came from the hand of God … Just as prior to bringing them into the land, God designated Balaam the adversary and Moses their prophet to foretell the successes and evils that will befall them … so when they were exiled from their land, God decided to foretell all the exiles and misfortunes that will happen to them, in order that they should not think that they were abandoned to the vicissitudes of fortune.\(^{21}\)

As the Book of Daniel, written at the beginning of Jewish exile, is the prophetic book of exile anticipating all its terrible history and promising its end, so Abravanel’s commentary on Daniel, written at the beginning of the new exile of Sephardic Jewry, aspires to be the book of consolation of this new exile. The parallel between the authors, Daniel and Abravanel, is drawn in the fifth section of Ma’ayney ha-Yeshu’\(a\) where Daniel is depicted as a descendant of King David, as Abravanel considers himself to be, and as a counselor of kings who unites in his person both political virtues and wisdom, attributes that Abravanel repeatedly ascribes to himself.\(^{22}\)

As for the consolatory dimension of Daniel’s prophetic visions,

\(^{21}\) Ma’ayney ha-Yeshu’\(a\), pp. 29b-30a, Perush \(\v\)al Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 296-297.

\(^{22}\) Ma’ayney ha-Yeshu’\(a\), pp. 30a-31a, Perush \(\v\)al Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 299-301.
Isaac Abravanel’s *Ma‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘a*

Abravanel determines it using a medical metaphor which is a clear allusion to the humanistic consolatory conception Abravanel used in many of his writings.23

The practice of the expert physician is to say to the patient: You will now experience a difficult period with fearful circumstances, but do not be afraid because afterwards relief and cure will arrive ... So is the matter of Daniel who foresaw the four kingdoms, their reign and the misfortunes that they would bring upon Israel. With this, he immediately mentioned the king Messiah who will be in the future ... Since we have seen that all the things that were related to the four kingdoms were fulfilled without exception ... we have a weighty proof and convincing argument that God will fulfill His prophecies of good as well. Thus, the prophecies of evils and of goods took place at the time that they took place and were announced when Israel was exiled from its land in order that they [Israel] should not fall into despair from the harshness of the misfortunes, but always trust in their God and await the time of His salvation.24

The anticipation of the misfortunes of Jewish exile during the four kingdoms and of the redemption in the fifth is presented by Abravanel as the consolatory content of the visions of Daniel. Such a presentation reveals in fact Abravanel’s rhetorical construction of his own commentary, which shows how the bad prophecies of Daniel’s vision were fulfilled in order to have a strong rhetorical argument for the future realization of Daniel’s messianic prophecies. Indeed, at the end of the twelve chapters of the book which are called by Abravanel ‘wells’ (*ma‘ayanot*), at the end of the seventy sub-sections called ‘palms’ (*temarim*), Don Isaac lists Daniel’s seventy prophecies which fulfilled

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themselves (except for the last five, which are messianic), as the commentary has shown.\textsuperscript{25} The reading of this listing is the last stage of Abravanel’s rhetorical composition, in which the reader gets a comprehensive view of the prophetic nature of the Book of Daniel.

We can now define the relationship between Abravanel’s commentary and the Book of Daniel. The commentary, which is in no way a medieval linear annotation to the biblical text, but rather an autonomous literary work, presents an interpretation of the visual forms of Daniel’s visions and dreams converting them into a realistic historical narrative; \textit{a posteriori}, the reader is moved to realize that the Book of Daniel is a consolatory anticipation of the entire history of Jewish exile, and above all a messianic promise close to fulfillment. The commentary is composed in order to recreate the value of the sacred source for the readers, who then should valorize the commentary, the actual book, and support its author. As a consequence, the essential parts are those in which Abravanel skillfully converts each part of Daniel’s visions or dreams into a sequence of historical events linked to a specific empire: Babylon, Persia, the empire of Alexander the Great and his successors, and above all Rome in its different periods: monarchy, republic, empire, Christianization, and then the division between Christianity and Islam.\textsuperscript{26} Beyond this first level of explanation of Daniel’s visions and dreams, Abravanel adds two others: calculations of the major dates of the redemption process, which announce its near fulfillment from the year 1503 onwards,\textsuperscript{27} and an astrological justification of the validity of Daniel’s secret indications of the dates of redemption.

Without entering into the details of Abravanel’s astrological discussion, I will briefly review his main arguments. Abravanel distinguishes twelve great conjunctions according to the union of Saturn and Jupiter – the bodies which, after the sun, have the greatest astrological influence on the earth – with the twelve signs of the zodiac (in 2860

\textsuperscript{25} Ma\'ayei ha-Yeshu\’a, pp. 131a-139a; Perush ʿal Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 418-421.
\textsuperscript{26} A fine example of Abravanel’s hermeneutics is his interpretation of Daniel’s dream of the four beasts, Ma\'ayei ha-Yeshu\’a, pp. 55a-73b; Perush ʿal Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 328-346.
\textsuperscript{27} Ma\'ayei ha-Yeshu\’a, pp. 120b-124b; Perush ʿal Neviim u-Ketuvim, pp. 400-406.
year cycles). Abravanel begins his discussion of the cycle of the twelve great conjunctions with the conjunction with the constellation Pisces, which was responsible for Israel’s departure from Egypt. Abravanel depicts its effect as follows:

Since the effect of the great conjunction is to bring the nation and the subject that receives its influence from one extreme to the other … its action will necessarily fall on the most debased nation, enslaved in a land that is not theirs, in order that the constellation bring it to the zenith of the highest rank. Since the people of Israel were in this extreme of debasement and defect, in being slaves to the Egyptians, what was not true of any other nation, therefore the emanation of this great conjunction fell on it to elevate it to the uppermost degree of human success.28

Such a depiction of the revolution in Israel’s destiny that was linked to the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn with the constellation Pisces has to remind us of contemporaneous humanistic discussions of the effect of fortune on political history.29 Abravanel points here to Israel’s great historical moment and explains its astrological background, shedding new light on the fortune of Israel and on its possible renewal. After the complete cycle of the twelve conjunctions, Abravanel announces to his reader that the period of the next conjunction with Pisces has already begun, and that the change of fortune for Israel, its redemption, is to be expected imminently:

Now around the year 5224 [1464] from the creation, after having transpired twelve great conjunctions from the time of the grand conjunction of ‘the Exodus from Egypt’ in Pisces – with their completion the grand conjunction will again return to the constellation Pisces. … Since creation until now Saturn and Jupiter conjoined in Pisces only twice: first, in the year 2365,
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during the sojourn of Israel in Egypt three years prior to the birth of Moses, which was 83 years prior to his prophecy and miracles and the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah; second, now near the year 5224 … Since the two conjunctions are equal – both being in the grand conjunction of the constellation of Pisces – it is necessary that the second corresponds completely to the one during the exodus from Egypt … so this second Israeli conjunction will herald prophecy and redemption for the community of Israel. There is no doubt that the time of the birth of the man of God, the Messiah, has come.30

Astrology confirms what Abravanel has already shown through his interpretation of Daniel’s visions, namely, that the good fortune of Israel is returning. Aware of the potential conflict of such an astrological approach with the principle of a special divine providence over Israel, Abravanel proposes a reconciliation of astrology and divine providence:

I would first suggest that the higher beings care for the lower ones in two ways: ordering and influencing. ‘Ordering’ is bestowing the capacity and disposition for some future matter, and influencing is to bestow the power and completion of the matter … Since every human body changes – according to its nature, composition and temperament – by the activities of the celestial bodies, whether it be a body of a Jew or of a non-Jew, it is necessary that their [the celestial bodies] ordering be inclusive of all the nations together with Israel … All the souls belonging to the nations are conducted by the celestial system – that is, by the souls of the spheres and the stars just as their bodies are conducted and cared for by the celestial bodies … [In the case of] the nation of Israel, however, the part which is the soul is specially disposed for being lead by God due to the Torah.31

Astral influence does not contradict divine providence: they are two levels, like body and soul. Israel and the nations differ in their political history, the one being only partially subject to astral influence that can

30  Miḥayne ha-Yeshu’a, pp. 131a-b; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 412.
31  Miḥayne ha-Yeshu’a, p. 134b; Perush ‘al Neviim u-Ketuvim, p. 415.
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be increased or diminished by divine providence, the other being completely subject to it. This difference notwithstanding, astrology, like the realistic historical interpretation of Daniel’s visions, plays a major role in the rhetoric of Abravanel’s book. It provides another strong argument for the accuracy of his messianic speculations, and so for the messianic value of Daniel’s visions.

We can now sum up Abravanel’s dual rhetorical construction of the Book of Daniel and of his own commentary: allegoric historical interpretations, calculations of the dates of the redemption process, and astrological calculations develop the visions of Daniel into a series of harmonious rhetorical arguments emphasizing when was the fortunate moment of the nation of Israel in the history of the rise and fall of empires, and when another will be. On the eve of the Jewish exile, Daniel’s anticipation of the fall and future rise of Israel affirms the continuous historical existence of Israel within the general history of nations. Abravanel’s commentary, at the dawn of the new Jewish exile, confirms Daniel’s prophecies by showing their fulfillment and by disclosing the date of the redemption they hold. *Ma‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘a* succeeds in including the whole of Jewish exile within the two poles of the sacred text and its commentary, so that, engaged in this historical and hermeneutic circle, the reader, especially the Sephardic one, recovers a consolatory sense of control over his historical destiny as well as a sense of continuity in Jewish leadership assumed by the figure of the author. In the same way this interpretation confirms the prophecies of the Book of Daniel, so the image of the author corresponds to that of Daniel and is constructed, in parallel to his prophetic virtues, on Abravanel’s rhetorical ability to write a book which creates a meaningful and consolatory perspective on exile. The rhetorical purpose of the book is to reassure the reader in its historical national existence; the reader in turn has to accept the literary self-image of the author. The effect that *Ma‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘a* intends to produce on the reader is that he find his place in history by means of the book, as well as a leader in the person of the author.

In conclusion, let us turn to the printers in Ferrara who printed *Ma‘aynei ha-Yeshu‘a* in 1551, that is to say, after the latest date
Abravanel gives for the redemption, 1547. Indeed, Samuel Zarfati\(^{32}\) refers in his foreword to the fact that Abravanel failed in his calculations but then justifies the publication of the commentary. First Samuel excuses Abravanel for his error by pointing out the positive rhetorical effect of such calculations, similar to what Abravanel did in his second justification of his messianic calculations. Samuel also mentions Abravanel’s own precaution in the introductory part of the commentary where he insists on the fallibility of his calculations. Of greater interest is Samuel’s mention of the fact that the rhetorical construction of *Ma’ayanet ha-Yeshu’ah* can still be very useful in the polemic against Christians:

If he failed in calculating the date of the end, do not hasten to defame him. He followed in the steps of his ancestors, because each righteous man, in his generation, wants to fortify the heart, and is in a hurry to understand the books and to hasten the end … So did Isaac when he decided to follow his inspiration; but he put a condition at the beginning of his work … he does not affirm to be absolutely correct … Let us be grateful to him … we have [in him] a remarkable vessel with a tongue that speaks great things … against those who pretend to be holy and revile us … He prepared spears and sharp arrows against the pursuers … he delved into their book to its innermost parts and counters them by different refutations.\(^{33}\)

Without exaggerating the importance of such statements, one sees in Samuel’s words a sign of his positive attitude toward the rhetorical construction of Abravanel’s book as a historical-astrological justification of Daniel’s prophecies against Christian apologetics. A much clearer sign of such a positive reception can be found in the novel feature of this edition, the second foreword written by Baruch

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33 *Ma’ayanet ha-Yeshu’ah*, p. 2a.
Isaac Abravanel’s *Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a*

Forte,\(^{34}\) which is a laudatory biography of the author based largely on Abravanel’s own autobiographical introductions to his commentaries. Forte writes: ‘The knowledge of the efficient cause in the writings of the perfect men is the superior and principal one among the four causes because the knowledge of the strength of their reason and wisdom is what increases the desire of men to read their writings’.\(^{35}\) It is interesting to note that Forte’s justification for his biographical introduction is based on the model of the four causes of the medieval *accessus ad auctores*,\(^ {36}\) but it only stresses the significance of the efficient cause, the author, revealing Forte’s assimilation of the Renaissance notion of the book as an agent of the author’s fame. Zarfati’s and Forte’s paratexts of the printed edition can be considered as a reception and implementation of Abravanel’s conception of book agency and authorship, which intends to create a strong tie between the reader and the author through a rhetorical restructuring of the Jewish medieval commentary into an autonomous literary composition. Indeed, Zarfati praises the hermeneutic construction of *Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a* as most relevant for the Jewish-Christian polemic and also Don Isaac’s rhetorical messianic intention to return his reader to a certain historical-religious outlook, whereas Forte draws the reader to Abravanel’s book by a political and literary biography of the author which reveals his many virtues and completes Zarfati’s praise of the book by integrating it into the history of a leader and of a nation. Thus the first printed edition of *Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a* was rendered by both author and publishers to be a successful encounter place of Jewish readership and leadership.


\(^{35}\) *Ma’aynei ha-Yeshu’a*, p. 2b.


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