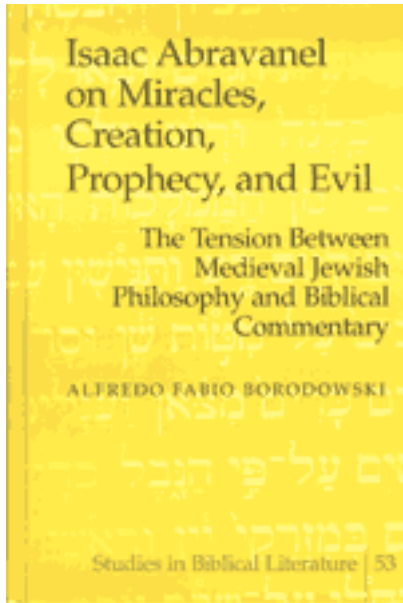


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Borodowski, Alfredo Fabio

Isaac Abravanel, on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil: The Tension Between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary

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Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) was an important financier, biblical exegete, and severe critic of philosophy. However, despite his criticisms, he internalized and responded to all of the major themes associated with medieval Jewish philosophy. Within this context, he articulated a paradigm of Judaism that was a response to the hyper-rational ones provided by the likes of Maimonides (d. 1204) and Gersonides (d. 1344). Despite this, or indeed because of it, Abravanel is often regarded as a bad philosopher. His philosophical treatises are often marginalized and his biblical commentaries frequently overlooked in favor of those written by more famous exegetes such as Ibn Ezra or Rashi. It is within this context that Alfredo Fabio Borodowski tries to set the record straight by showing the depth and nuance of Abravanel's thought. The stated goal of this book is to demonstrate the connections between Abravanel's biblical commentaries and his more "philosophical" treatises, in particular, a work entitled *Mifalot Elohim (The Works of God)*.

Borodowski's argument is divided into eight chapters, all of which revolve around, in one way or another, the topic of miracles. Miracles were an important feature of medieval Jewish philosophy because they showed clearly the nature of

the relationship between God and the world, the Active Intellect and the prophet. The position one took on miracles reflected larger issues such as God's agency, his ability to know particulars, and the role of prophecy. Since the philosophical program was a rational one, if miracles were understood literally they represented the violation of natural laws. How, in other words, could God do that which was naturally impossible? This led some philosophers, most notably Maimonides, to argue that miracles were natural events but only seemed miraculous because of their unusual time or location (35–36), whereas other philosophers, especially Gersonides, claimed that miracles were programmed into creation.

Most medieval philosophers argued that the performance of miracles was contingent upon the intellectual (and thus natural) perfection of the prophet and that the direct cause was not God but the Active Intellect (the tenth and last of the divine Intellects). In arguing against this, Abravanel took the position that the prophet was defined not by his intellectual ability but by his being chosen directly by God, who, in turn, was the direct cause of the miracle (39ff.). Miracles, then, could be performed any time that God willed (40).

Abravanel's philosophical thought, according to Borodowski, is predicated on the fact that God "acts directly upon creation and establishes a personal relationship with the Jewish people" (153). This concept of God's direct relationship to the world differs radically from the thought of Maimonides and Gersonides, who both argued that God was only remotely interested in human affairs. Why, they asked, would God qua pure Intellect and as such able to know only universals be interested in the material affairs of particular humans? The novelty of Abravanel's argument, according to Borodowski, is its ability to "assert the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy while simultaneously maximizing the force of divine miracles" (191).

The author's analysis is best when he is among the details. Whenever he steps back and surveys the bigger picture, however, it becomes less clear. Despite a brief introductory chapter on the cultural context of Abravanel, the author needs to do more to connect this important thinker to some of the broader themes and issues of Jewish intellectual history. What role, for example, did the expulsion from Spain in 1492 play in the development of Abravanel's thought? How exactly did Renaissance and humanist ideas impact works such as *Mifalot Elohim*? How does the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, fit into the puzzle? Moreover, despite the author's concern with the interface between biblical language and philosophical categories, he does not spend nearly enough time on it.

Consequently, the author does not show adequate familiarity with other secondary scholarship dealing with this topic.

I am a little unsettled by the author's general claims that he will "demonstrate that a thorough understanding of Abravanel's thought depends upon an integrative approach to his philosophical and exegetical writings" (1). This is surely self-evident and, as far as I am aware, others do this (e.g., the work of Eric Lawee and Menachem Kellner). Furthermore, I disagree with his comments that the relationship between biblical exegesis and philosophy is one that "has generally been neglected" (1). There exist numerous and important studies devoted to precisely this topic both in general and in the thought of specific Jewish philosophers such as Ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, Gersonides, and Ibn Kaspi.

One of the oddest features concerns not the book itself, but the series (Studies in Biblical Literature) in which it appears. According to the series' blurb, it is devoted to making a "significant contribution to the ongoing biblical discourse" (xi). This is problematic because this is not an introductory book examining the role that the Bible plays in medieval philosophical exegesis. As such, Borodowski assumes much from his reader. I am thus uncertain as to the anticipated audience of this work. For instance, highly specialized terms and obscure names are given, often without any sort of elaboration or definition. In other words, this book is *not* written for people in biblical studies who want to trace certain trajectories of Jewish interpretation. It is, however, a densely complex work devoted to unpacking an important topic in medieval Jewish thought.

As for the book itself, it bears many of the marks of a slightly revised dissertation. Although the ideas are original, the arguments are often dense and not as clearly expressed or developed as they could or should be. On the whole, the discussion is frequently repetitive and could have undergone further copy-editing. There exist many typos (especially in the footnotes), glaring infelicities (e.g., the bibliography cites entries under "Howard, Kreisel" and "Kreisel, Howard"), and inconsistent spellings of Hebrew names (e.g., Pulgar on 131 n. 15, but Poleqar on 172). Although Borodowski mentions the dissertations of scholars such as Lawee and Eisen, he does not mention the subsequent books and more developed arguments that grew out of them.

Despite such serious criticisms, I do not want to end this review on a negative note. Borodowski's book examines closely a number of topics that were central to medieval philosophy in general and medieval Jewish philosophy in particular,

and it is within this context that his thorough discussion of miracles makes an important contribution to the further elucidation of the complex thought of Isaac Abravanel.