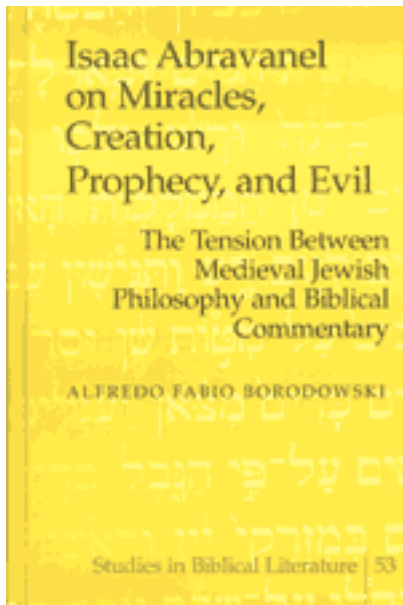


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Borodowski, Alfredo Fabio

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

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This book is based upon the premise “that during one of the most productive exegetical eras of Judaism, the Middle Ages, philosophy and exegesis were inseparable” (217). It follows logically that to understand either the philosophical corpus produced by Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) or his voluminous commentaries on Hebrew Scripture, the two corpora must be read in tandem. Moreover, it follows that both corpora must be read in light of the history of philosophy and theology—Islamic, Jewish and Christian—in the Middle East and in Europe in the High Middle Ages. Ultimately, the author, Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, demonstrates that this logical conclusion from his working hypothesis leads to an entirely new evaluation of Abravanel’s abiding contributions to philosophy and theology. In addition, he shows that some of Abravanel’s most important contributions to theology are prompted by his commitment as a biblical exegete to come to terms with rather than to gloss over the plain sense of Hebrew Scripture (see esp. 169–212).

Writing primarily for biblical scholars, who may have little or no familiarity either with medieval Jewish biblical exegesis or with medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophy, Borodowski prefaces his book with a brief biography of

Abravanel. This biography shows how Abravanel's successive careers in the service of Alphonso V of Portugal, Isabelle of Spain, Ferrante I of Naples, and Venice's "Council of Ten" enabled Abravanel to understand and to explain numerous texts in the biblical book of Kings. In addition, Borodowski shows that Abravanel should be of interest to modern biblical scholarship because of his critical thinking, his interest in history and geography, and his acquaintance with Greek and Roman authors and ancient and medieval Christian exegesis. In fact, Borodowski points out (14), Abravanel "incorporates some of the premises associated with original sin." In a section entitled "Abravanel's Impact upon Jewish Scholarship" (16–22), Borodowski shows that Abravanel's major contributions to theological speculation—both in his biblical commentaries and his philosophical treatise *Mifalot Elohim*, that is, "Acts of God"—have been wrongly neglected by Jewish scholars, who failed to appreciate either Abravanel's sophistication or his originality.

Borodowski concludes his introduction with two short essays entitled "Abravanel As a Philosopher-Exegete" (22–24) and "The Relevance of the Supernatural As a Case Study" (24–28). In these two essays Borodowski propounds the thesis that generates the remainder of the book. This thesis is that, while the main dilemma of earlier Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides (1135–1204) and Gersonides (1266–1344) was to correlate philosophical theories with the Bible" (27), Abravanel's great achievement was to employ the language of philosophy to prove that "divine knowledge [i.e., Scripture] is qualitatively and quantitatively superior to philosophy" (213).

In fact, Abravanel's use of philosophy to show that biblical prophecy and biblical narrative have at least as much to teach us about life as do the ancient Greek philosophers and the medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers should remind modern biblical scholars of the equally important attempt of Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72) to convey a very similar idea in *Die Prophetie* (1936), *Man Is Not Alone* (1951), and *God in Search of Man* (1956). *Mutatis mutandi*, one might compare also the attempt of Amos of Tekoa to distance himself from the prophets (Amos 7:14) without himself ceasing to be a prophet (Amos 3:6).

Focusing on Abravanel's treatment of supernatural events, Borodowski explains that Maimonides adopted the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* because of its plausibility, while Gersonides rejected it as "not only implausible, but preposterous" (38). "Abravanel," on the other hand, "introduces a new category of the impossible, that which is impossible in some respect or in relation to a

particular agent.” This makes it reasonable to suggest that “all that is not logically impossible is possible” (45).

Abravanel shows that inductive reasoning does not provide enough information concerning the ultimate cause of things. Consequently, we find it hard to believe that something can be on fire without burning or that something could come into being from nothing. The observation that fire consumes is based upon inductive reasoning that does not take into account exceptional cases such as that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace in Dan 3:23–26 (see Borodowski, 66–70).

Borodowski explains that Abravanel argues that miracles are a testimony of God’s power to execute his will in an unnatural manner. They represent a “small scale replica” of the original and greatest wonder, creation. However, different from the creative act, they possess an “irrefutability conveyed by having been witnessed by the most trustful of men, prophets, and by the entire community of Israelites at Sinai” (70–71).

Creation, according to Abravanel, is the concrete expression of the exception to the rule of natural generation, which requires three elements: (1) correlation between the generating source and the object generated; (2) a specific interval of time; and (3) a specific location. As Abravanel explains in both his “Acts of God” and his commentary on Exod 29 (see 71), human beings are formed according to the rule of natural generation in the womb, while the creation of Adam was wombless and from dust.

Interestingly enough, some five centuries after Abravanel, in May 2003 an Israeli woman gave birth to a child that had gestated in her liver rather than in her womb, thus defying the rule of natural generation as formulated by Abravanel. Ironically, from the point of view of creationists, who regard evolutionary theory as contrary to Scripture, evolutionary theory’s positing that birds evolved from reptiles would also appear to contradict the rule of natural generation, according to which elephants produce elephants and ants produce ants (74), and support the doctrine of creation as explained by Abravanel.

This point should be of more than casual interest to students and teachers involved in introductory courses in Hebrew Scripture, where inevitably the meaning and credibility of Gen 1-3 are discussed. Not surprisingly, Borodowski does not digress from his exposition to make this point even in a footnote. The reason seems to be the that contemporary biblical studies—whether historical,

philological, literary, feminist, or whatever—is rooted in traditions of humanistic learning that seek, like Abravanel himself, to uncover in sacred texts forgotten truths that will liberate women and men from enslavement to ignorance and tyranny and enable them to become better people. Borodowski, on the other hand, is a specialist in the field of “Jewish thought,” an academic discipline that seeks mostly to define and to delineate and trace the history of ideas. Unlike the discipline of philosophy, the discipline of Jewish thought rarely addresses the question as to whether a particular idea found in an ancient, medieval, or modern theological treatise is valid or cogent. However, by exploring the nexus between Abravanel’s theological and philosophical works and his biblical commentaries Borodowski crosses the divide that separates the generally antiquarian interest of the history of Jewish thought from the mindset of the biblical scholar, who is interested in what ancient, medieval, and modern commentaries can teach us about both the sacred/privileged text and reality.

Borodowski notes that, even where the raw material for correlating a medieval Hebrew commentator’s exegetical corpus with that commentator’s philosophical corpus exists, the attempts to explore them in tandem were rare. The parade example until now was the work of the late Frank Talmage on the Kimhi family (19).

Borodowski seems to have been so successful in the book under review because he chose to write about the work of an individual who produced an unusually large and lucid corpus of both exegetical and philosophical works. What is amazing is the clarity with which Borodowski expounds the medieval doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo* and *ex nihilo nihil fit*. This is especially important for a target audience of biblical scholars, whose academic training usually emphasizes ancient languages and literatures, archaeology, and poetics of biblical prose and poetry.

Having shown that miracles constitute for Abravanel empirical evidence of the truth of *creatio ex nihilo* (79), Borodowski devotes more than half the book to demonstrating that additional questions concerning miracles and Abravanel’s answers to them from Scripture and from reason are, indeed, interesting and compelling to twenty-first-century readers.

For example, he shows that for Gersonides “miracles are not the product of divine intervention, but they are the result of the prophetic activation of the impersonal miraculous laws.” In other words, miracles are delivered all the time but only received (like radio waves by a radio receiver) when the receiver is a

prophet (101). Abravanel, on the other hand, holds that “miracles are voluntary responses to specific circumstances, but they do not entail a sudden reaction aimed at controlling an unexpected situation. For example, the deluge [in the time of Noah] did not represent an extreme measure intended to contain an unexpected crisis. It was conceived as a viable course of action at the very generation of the universe. Thus instituted since creation, miracles do not imply any mutation of the divine wisdom and will” (115).

Not surprisingly, both Gersonides and Abravanel sought to exegete *m. Avot* 5:6 in accord with their respective views of the universe. The latter text asserts that God arranged just before the onset of the Sabbath of creation week for at least ten of the miracles that would later unfold. For Gersonides, this mishnah means that all miracles were programmed into the universe from the beginning.

Abravanel, on the other hand, seeks to reconcile that passage of Mishnah with both the freedom of divine and human volition and divine omniscience. He explains that *m. Avot* 5:6 mentioned ten particular miracles that were provided for specifically at twilight on the sixth day of creation precisely in response to humankind’s rebellious nature revealed in the course of his first day on earth, which was the sixth day of creation:

Rabbinic tradition teaches that on the sixth day, the very day on which they were created, Adam and Eve sinned, were judged, and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Initially they were condemned to death. However, at the moment of the execution of the maximum punishment, God foresaw that in the distant future other creatures would atone for their sins, reducing Adam’s and Eve’s sentence to expulsion. Moreover, it was at this precise instance that God conceived of ten future miracles, mentioned in the *Mishnah*, which are associated with Adam’s and Eve’s sin. (119–20)

Equally compelling is Borodowski’s exposition of the debate between Gersonides, who holds that miracles appear only as a manifestation of God’s love, and Abravanel, who holds that miracles can also manifest God’s justice. The latter opinion enables Abravanel to ascribe to God rather than to preexistent matter the evil we experience as, for example, in the undeserved suffering of infants (164). The latter idea may well be adumbrated in Isa 45:7: “who fashions peace and creates evil.”

In his penultimate chapter, "Prophecy and Miracles," Borodowski discusses the anthropological theory of miracles expounded by Avicenna and eventually rejected by Islamic thinkers but taken up by Ibn Ezra and incorporated into his biblical commentaries (Exod 27:21; Ps 139:18). The theory was taken up again by numerous Jewish philosophers and mystics into modern times. As throughout the book, Borodowski shows that Abravanel spells out his rejection of the theory at hand by clarifying the many references in Hebrew Scripture to a prophet's being present when a miracle occurs:

(1) the prophetic intervention will serve as a confirmation of the veracity of the prophecy; and (2) as vehicles of communication between God and His people, prophets would employ the miraculous events to inculcate true belief. The prophetic participation is purely functional and not substantial. (174–75)

This discussion leads in turn to a discussion of the nature of Mosaic prophecy vis-à-vis other prophecy (176-209) and the necessary exegesis of Deut 34:10–11: "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. In all the signs and wonders, which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and to all his land" (KJV). Borodowski shows (186) that matters left obscure in Abravanel's "Acts of God" had to be clarified in Abravanel's biblical commentaries. Moreover, Borodowski shows that Abravanel's dilemma was to preserve Moses' uniqueness while simultaneously maintaining the literal meaning of the miracles performed by other prophets. However, Borodowski shows that in his commentaries on Josh 10 and on the Elijah cycle in Kings Abravanel tried to argue—against the biblical narrative—that, in fact, Moses had performed miracles greater than Joshua and Elijah. Borodowski argues that the compelling reason for this turnabout was Deut 34:11, which suggests that Moses' uniqueness consisted not only of his "face-to-face" relationship with God but also of his being an instrumentality for the performance of miracles greater than any prophet afterwards.

In other words, the plain meaning of Scripture influenced Abravanel both in his exegesis and his theology. Moreover, like exegetes of every theological persuasion in every generation—whether philologists, historians, or theologians—Abravanel had to determine which of two contradictory texts should be believed and which should be eiseged.

Borodowski's highly lucid volume concludes with a rich bibliography and an index of subjects and authorities. I highly recommend this volume to scholars,

clergy, students, and laypersons interested in the history of biblical exegesis and medieval Jewish philosophy.