

WRITING BY DIVINE IMPERATIVE AS A
CRITERION FOR THE PROPHETIC AUTHORITY OF
TEXTS IN THE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS OF ISAAC
ABARBANEL*

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Introduction

In the second “investigation” (Heb., מהקר) of his general introduction to the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings),¹ in his treatment of the “formal cause” of the books,² Isaac Abarbanel raises the problem of the sense in which they are to be considered prophetic

* In loving memory of Yosef Winter, of blessed memory, who will be sorely missed by the staff of Mikra'ot Gedolot Ha-Keter

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¹ Even though it is located before the commentary on Joshua, it constitutes a general introduction to all four books. In his introduction to the commentary on Samuel (p. 7), Abarbanel names it “my introduction to the book of Joshua,” but from his introduction to the book of Kings (p. 428) it appears that this was probably meant as an abbreviation of “the general introduction that I wrote at the beginning of the commentary on Joshua” (Cf. *Commentary on Isaiah*, p. 40: “The general introduction in the beginning of [the commentary on] Joshua”).

² The second “investigation” is an Aristotelian prologue in which Abarbanel analyzes the Former Prophets from the point of view of their four Aristotelian causes, the final, the efficient, the formal, and the material causes (in that order). For possible sources of Abarbanel's knowledge of this exordial format, see Eric Lawee, “Introducing Scripture: The *accessus ad auctores* in Hebrew Exegetical Literature From the Thirteenth Through the Fifteenth Centuries,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al. (eds.), *With Reverence for the Word*, Oxford 2003, pp. 166-167.

works.³ In ancient times these books were already considered part of the prophetic corpus that makes up the middle part of the tripartite biblical canon (Law, Prophets, and Writings),⁴ even though from the point of view of their literary genre they consist of narrative or historiography.

There are three reasons, Abarbanel answers, by virtue of which these books should nevertheless be considered prophetic in essence. The first reason is trivial: the content of the books was revealed through prophets,⁵ that is, men capable of serving as mediators of divine revelation to the rest of mankind. The third reason, not entirely original with Abarbanel, provides deeper insight into the nature of prophecy, which, Abarbanel contends, is not only directed toward the future, as the more popular view perhaps would have it. Rather, it constitutes any insight obtainable only through divine revelation, including true knowledge of past events and their place in the divine purpose in history.⁶ By presenting this reason Abarbanel not only

³ *Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, pp. 16-17.

⁴ See BT Bava Batra 14b: “The order of the Prophets is: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah.” The origin of the appellation “Former Prophets” is unclear. According to Michael Avioz (“On the Origins of the Term *Nevi'im Rishonim*,” *JSIJ* 8 [2009], pp. 1-7 [Heb.]), its origin is in the introduction to the Soncino edition of the Former Prophets (1485), and after that in the commentary of Isaac Abarbanel on the Former Prophets, first printed in 1512 in Pesaro. But we are not convinced of the validity of Avioz’ conclusions, not only because Abarbanel wrote his commentary in 1483 (before the printing of the Soncino edition) and because of the difficulty inherent in the enormous number of books one would have to examine in order to locate the first occurrence of the appellation in Jewish literature (if this is possible at all), but also because in both cases it cannot be inferred beyond reasonable doubt that the appellation applies exclusively to those four books. It might as well refer to a larger body of books, of which our “Former Prophets” are only a part (see *ibid.*), which is the case in other places in Abarbanel’s writings (see, for example, *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah*, p. 296). Cf. the commentary of Rabbenu Tam on Job 14:12, who refers to “the former prophets” and then quotes a verse from Jeremiah.

⁵ In his discussion of the books’ “efficient cause” (pp. 14-16), Abarbanel reached the conclusion that Samuel wrote the entire books of Joshua and Judges and the book of Samuel until the description of Samuel’s death (1 Sam 25:1). The remaining parts of the book of were written by Nathan the prophet and Gad the seer, and the different documents were joined into a unified work by Jeremiah, who also wrote the book of Kings.

⁶ The idea that commandments are only revealed through prophecy is found in different places in Talmudic literature (BT Yoma 80a; PT Megillah 70d; etc.)

answers his initial question but also discloses the falsity of the premise on which it is based, namely, that prophecy is essentially prediction of the future. Abarbanel's second reason is undoubtedly the most surprising and unexpected: the books must have been written at divine behest, meaning that regardless of the way the content of the book was conceived or by whom it was conceived, its prophetic essence depends on a specific divine imperative to commit it to writing. This is, to the best of our knowledge, a novel criterion that did not exist in Jewish thought before Abarbanel, and its exact nature and rationale are in need of clarification.

From Abarbanel's short discussion in the present context it is not clear whether he considers the fulfillment of each of the three aforementioned criteria as sufficient to define a given text as prophetic, or whether they are cumulative, so that only the simultaneous fulfillment of all of them would be considered sufficient. However, the examination of related discussions, some found in the vicinity of the present discussion, reveals that the three criteria are cumulative. A prophet can write a book by means of his own creative powers, that is, a non-prophetic book, such as the book of Lamentations, which Abarbanel attributes to Jeremiah,⁷ and, as we shall see, the book of Ruth, which he attributes to Samuel. It is therefore evident that the fulfillment of the first criterion is not sufficient, since not every book written by a prophet is *ipso facto* a prophetic book. Furthermore, a literary work can contain insights that were conceived through prophecy, while its status and authority are, nevertheless, non-prophetic. This is the case, as will be demonstrated, regarding the books of Chronicles and Daniel. Thus, fulfillment of the first and the third criteria together is not sufficient, since even a book containing knowledge obtainable only through God's revelation to a

and medieval commentaries (e.g. Rashi on Deut 17:20; R. Shlomo ibn Adret [Rashba], *Perushei ha-Aggadot*, in J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth: Sein Leben und seine Schriften nebst handschriftlichen Beilagen, zum ersten Male*, Breslau 1863, p. 36; etc.). The *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, which Abarbanel had read thoroughly, contains a definition of prophecy similar to that of Abarbanel: "Prophecy first and chiefly consists in knowledge, because, to wit, prophets know things that are far removed from man's knowledge" (*Summa Theologica* 2, II, q. 171). But more than anyone else, Abarbanel seems to have learnt about these ideas from the writings of the eminent Catholic theologian of the first half of fifteenth century Iberia, Alfonso Tostado (1400-1455), Bishop of Avila. This point will be elaborated on below.

⁷ See *Commentary on Isaiah*, p. 40; *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 215; *Ma'ayaney ha-Yeshu'ah*, p. 292; *Commentary on the Guide*, II, chap. 37.

prophet does not necessarily bear divine authority. Hence, according to Abarbanel, for a book to be defined as prophetic, it must have been written by divine command.

The Need for a New “Prophetic” Criterion

Abarbanel aimed at disclosing the inner logic and consistency of the Jewish (Talmudic⁸) tripartite division of Scripture mentioned in the introduction. In the first “investigation” of his introduction to the Former Prophets he laid the foundations for his approach when vindicating this division against the Christian quadripartite division (Law, History, Prophecy, Wisdom), and he frequently returns to this question throughout his biblical exegesis whenever questions arise with regard to the accuracy of his system. Abarbanel’s approach is dominated by Maimonides’ distinctions between the different levels of prophetic inspiration within Scripture: the prophecy of Moses, which is so exalted that it has nothing in common with other levels of inspiration except for the name;⁹ the prophecy of the rest of the prophets, which Maimonides classifies in nine lesser and more uncertain degrees of prophecy;¹⁰ and the Holy Spirit, which is a divinely assisted intensification of man’s ordinary cognitive and creative faculties, but nevertheless below the level of true prophecy. This level characterizes the authors of the Writings, the seventy elders,¹¹ etc.¹²

The late fourteenth–early fifteenth century scholar Profiat Duran, in his grammatical work *Ma’aseh Ephod* (1403), based himself on the Maimonidean scheme in order to explain Scripture’s division into three parts.¹³ The Torah, which was conceived through the prophecy

⁸ As will become clear, according to Abarbanel the sages of the Talmud imposed the tripartite division on an already existing corpus and order of books, and they also invented the names of the parts, while the order of the books was fixed by Ezra the Scribe and the Men of the Great Assembly, who were the final redactors of the Bible.

⁹ *Guide for the Perplexed*, II, chap. 35. For specifications of the points of supremacy of Mosaic prophecy, see *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10:1; *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 7:6.

¹⁰ *Guide for the Perplexed*, II, chap. 45.

¹¹ Num 11:25-30.

¹² *Guide for the Perplexed*, II, chap. 45.

¹³ Duran’s explanation is to some extent inherent in or at least deducible from Maimonides’ own discussions, but since Maimonides focused on the different degrees of prophecy and not on the division of Scripture, Abarbanel relates to Duran as the first to deal with this issue (“I have not found among our sages

of Moses, derived directly from God, and symbolizes the uppermost, spiritual world of God and the angels and also the Holiest of the Holy in the Temple;¹⁴ ordinary prophecy, which was conceived through the mediation of The Active Intellect (that is, influenced by the heavenly bodies), symbolizes the supra-lunar world of the spheres and the planets and also the Holy; while the Writings, written upon human initiative, symbolize the sub-lunar world and the Temple courtyard.¹⁵

Abarbanel agreed with the basics of the Maimonidean classification of prophecy,¹⁶ and Duran's application of it in order to explain the division of Scripture's also found great favor in his eyes, as he states in the first "investigation" (see below). Furthermore, Abarbanel's own explanation of Scripture's tripartite division is also based on the differentiation between levels of prophetic inspiration, and in this sense it can be called Maimonidean-Duranian. Nevertheless, in order to vindicate this approach and apply it to every specific case, Abarbanel had to modify it considerably, and the modification he carried out is integrally related to his discovery of the novel "prophetic" criterion described above. That is, the divine imperative to

anyone who dealt with this question, except for the *Ephod*" [*Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, p. 9]). Abarbanel must have meant that Duran was the first to suggest a comprehensive explanation for the division of Scripture, since a partial explanation had already been given in the introduction of Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) to the book of Psalms, where he explains that the book was included in the Writings and not in the Prophets because it was written through the Holy Spirit. It is hard to believe that Abarbanel did not know this source. For additional medieval sources that base the division of Scripture on distinctions between different levels of prophecy, see Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, Hamden 1976, p. 169, n. 294 [henceforth: Leiman, *Canonization*].

¹⁴ On the origins of the comparison between the Scriptures and the Temple, see N. Wieder, "Sanctuary as a Metaphor for Scripture," *JJS* 8 (1957), pp. 165-175. For the meaning of this comparison in the aesthetic thought of Duran, see Kalman Bland, "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics: Maimonides, Body, and Scripture in Profiat Duran," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993), pp. 548-557.

¹⁵ Profiat Duran, *Ma'aseh Ephod*, ed. Y. T. Friedländer and Yaakov Cohen, Vienna 1865 (repr. Jerusalem 1970), p. 11.

¹⁶ For a study of Abarbanel's attitude toward Maimonidean prophetology, his agreements and disagreements, see Alvin Reines, *Maimonides and Abarbanel on Prophecy*, Cincinnati 1970. For a general study on Abarbanel's highly complex attitude toward the teachings of Maimonides, see Eric Lawee, "The Good We Accept and the Bad We Do Not: Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel's Attitude Toward Maimonides," in Jay M. Harris (ed.), *Be'erot Yitzhak*, Cambridge Mass. and London 2005, pp. 119-160.

write, though it is only one of the three cumulative criteria by virtue of which a literary work bears prophetic authority, is nevertheless the central axis around which Abarbanel's vindication of Scripture's division revolves.

This study will therefore proceed in the direction opposite to the one taken by Abarbanel himself. After having acquainted ourselves with the ways in which he applies the criterion throughout his exegesis, we will be in a better position to go back to Abarbanel's own starting point, the first "investigation" of the introduction to the Former Prophets, and to analyze its relation to his principal view of the tripartite division of Scripture.¹⁷

Having explained the prophetic nature of the Former Prophets and thus justified their location within the prophetic corpus, Abarbanel shows how understanding the three prophetic criteria can solve problems relating to additional texts which, at first sight, appear to be located in the wrong section of the Bible.¹⁸ First Abarbanel addresses Chronicles, a historiographical work consisting of much the same (prophetic) stories that are contained in the Former Prophets, asking: Shouldn't this book have been included in the prophetic section of the Bible? Abarbanel argues that the book of Chronicles fulfills none of the aforementioned criteria. It was written by Ezra the Scribe,¹⁹ to

¹⁷ The reason for this reversal is that the present study focuses on Abarbanel's invention/discovery of a novel criterion for the determination of a book's prophetic essence, and it is not meant to constitute a comprehensive analysis of Abarbanel's attitude towards the division of Scripture and the internal order of its books. Such a study is in preparation, and it will deal with issues that have no place here, such as Abarbanel's rejection of the Christian division and his fascinating suggestion of a completely different model, according to which the Bible is chronologically ordered. It should be stressed that the two models are complementary, not mutually exclusive. The present study also demonstrates that the chronological model was not meant to supplant the prophetological model, since the latter continued to occupy Abarbanel throughout his later exegetical writings. (Apart from an unfinished commentary on Deuteronomy begun in Portugal and the monograph on a perplexing biblical pericope [*Ateret Zekenim*], the commentary on the Former Prophets, begun upon his arrival in Spain, constitutes the inception of Abarbanel's systematic biblical exegesis.)

¹⁸ *Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, pp. 17-20.

¹⁹ According to the Talmud (BT Bava Batra 15a), it was begun by Ezra and completed by Nehemiah. On the (unjustified) tendency among medieval and modern scholars to ignore the role of Nehemiah when presenting the Talmudic (amoraic) view on the authorship of Chronicles, see Eran Viesel, "Ezra katav sifro veyahas shel divrei ha-yamim 'ad lo... uman 'askeh? Nehemia ben-

whom prophetic powers are nowhere attributed, through the Holy Spirit; Ezra wrote it on his own initiative, with no prior divine command to do so; and finally, the stories were not revealed to him by God; rather, he learned about them from the Former Prophets and from other written sources and oral traditions. The location of the book of Chronicles among the Writings is therefore completely justified. But what about the book of Ruth, which Abarbanel attributes to Samuel, unquestionably a prophet? Abarbanel explains that this book was written upon Samuel's own initiative and through the Holy Spirit alone. In other words, it fulfills only one of the three "prophetic" criteria.

The Song of David poses the opposite difficulty. This hymn is found in the book of Psalms (chap. 18) and it was written by David, who never reached a level higher than that of the Holy Spirit.²⁰ How, then, is one to explain that it was also included in the prophetic book of Samuel (2 Sam 22)? The answer is that it was incorporated into the book of Samuel by the prophetic author of this work:

Not all that is said and told in the books of the prophets must necessarily have been uttered originally through prophecy, seeing that the words of the kings, the priests, the officials, and the ordinary people are also recalled there, and they were not all prophets, nor were their words uttered in prophecy. Rather, it was the prophetic author of the book who wrote down all the plots and stories and words that others uttered, whether through the Holy Spirit, through prophecy, by ordinary reasoning, by way of curse, etc. – all in accordance with the order of the plot and its [historiosophic²¹] purpose.

Hakalya: On the Author of Chronicles in Bava Batra 15a," *JSQ* 16 (2009), pp. 243-254.

²⁰ "They [=the Writings, and among them the book of Psalms] were written through the Holy Spirit, and Scripture nowhere testifies that the divine word reached David, as it did regarding the rest of the prophets, so that David may be counted among them" (*Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, p. 10).

²¹ Abarbanel had a developed awareness of the fact that writers of history may be selective in their choice of material and include only events that could be used to serve their ideological purposes. Thus he solves the problem of the discrepancies between the stories about David in the books of Samuel and Chronicles by distinguishing between writing "absolute narrative in the manner of the chronicles that the nations produce concerning their matters" and writing "for instruction in the service of the Lord" (*Commentary on Samuel*, p. 5). The book of Samuel, like the rest of the Former Prophets, was written for the

By mentioning the prophetic author, Abarbanel implies that the incorporation of the Song of David in the book of Samuel fulfills all the conditions that make a work prophetic. Even though the song was not originally written by a prophet or through prophecy, it was incorporated into the book of Samuel by a prophet, who wrote the whole book following a divine command to do so, while both the suitability of the song to the general historiosophic purpose of the book and the specific place in which it was to be inserted were revealed to him by God.

Among all the cases dealt with in the introduction to the Former Prophets, that of the Song of David seems to be the one that most necessitates the invention or the discovery of a novel “prophetic” criterion. The Former Prophets would also have been deemed prophetic by virtue of the fulfillment of criteria one and three alone; the location of the book of Chronicles in the Writings is likewise justified by failure to meet those two criteria; and the book of Ruth fulfills only the first criterion. In contrast, with regard to the elevation of a work like the Song of David to the level of prophecy, it seems that without a specific divine command to include it in a new context, to make it part of a new creation, there is no other way a work composed by a mere human could possibly be endowed with divine authority. But once he discovered this criterion, Abarbanel, of course, applied it to all texts of the Bible.

The case of the Song of David also makes clear that the flexibility of the second “prophetic” criterion makes it extremely useful for solving questions of prophetic authority and the division of Scripture. Indeed, it can be applied almost arbitrarily, unlike the first criterion, which is almost completely invariable, since Abarbanel rejects the possibility of attributing prophecy to someone not explicitly called a prophet in the Bible.²² The third criterion is also somewhat restricted by the difficulty of determining precisely what knowledge is attributable solely to divine revelation. But the second criterion is subject to no scriptural or logical restrictions and could be applied as Abarbanel saw fit.

second purpose, which explains why the authors chose certain materials and excluded others.

²² Cf. n. 20 above. We say “almost,” since Abarbanel does not always accept the Talmudic tradition concerning the authorship of the biblical books, and theoretically a book might thus be termed prophetic by virtue of its attribution to an acknowledged prophet, although Abarbanel did not in fact do so.

We now turn to the analysis of two further cases where the criterion of the divine command plays a crucial role in Abarbanel's explanation of the location of a text. The first case, which concerns the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18), sheds additional light on the problems involved in defining the Song of David as prophetic. It makes clear that even if David had been on the highest rung of prophecy, his Song, since it is poetry, could not possibly be prophetic in Abarbanel's view.

One might not expect that the location of the Song of the Sea in the Pentateuch would present Abarbanel with an exegetical difficulty. The song was uttered by Moses,²³ the author of the Five Books of Moses, and its function as a song of praise following the crossing of the sea and the rescue from the Egyptians is completely reasonable. But within the framework of Abarbanel's prophetology the mere existence of poetry²⁴ in the Pentateuch is, in fact, deeply troubling. In his view, the prophecy of Moses is characterized by its utmost clarity, because "he received his prophecy not from the active intellect or through the mediation of any other separate intellect. Rather, it emanated directly from the First Cause, blessed be He,"²⁵ and furthermore "the prophetic spirit and abundance reached the highest rungs of his intellect without the involvement of the imaginative faculty," which is responsible for the figurative and unclear formulations of all other prophets.²⁶ Poetry, on the other hand, can by no means be prophetic, since it originates in the human intellect and imagination. Thus, despite their conspicuous formal resemblance, the figures of poetry and the figures of prophetic speech must not be equated:

²³ "With regard to what is written: 'Then Moses and the people of Israel sang,' this does not mean that all of them took part in the composition of the song. Rather, Moses alone composed it. But because the people of Israel joined him in chanting it, it says 'Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song in honor of the Lord'" (*Commentary on Exodus*, p. 216).

²⁴ The Hebrew word שיר means both "song" and "poetry," and its appearance in the Bible (sometimes in the feminine action-noun שירה) is understood consistently by Abarbanel as a designation for poetry.

²⁵ The integration of philosophical terminology ("First Cause" as an epithet for God) with religious fervor ("blessed be He") is characteristic of Abarbanel but by no means exclusive to him. For example, in the writings of Isaac ibn Latif one encounters the expression "The First Created Being, blessed be He," referring to the first emanated hypostasis and not to the Godhead itself (see Sarah Heller-Wilensky, "The 'First Created Being' in Early Kabbalah and its Philosophical Sources," in Sarah Heller-Wilensky and Moshe Idel [eds.], *Mehqarim be-Hagut Yehudit*, Jerusalem 1989, p. 263).

²⁶ *Commentary on Exodus*, pp. 280-281.

Prophecy is an abundance that flows to the intellect of the prophets and [ultimately reaches] the imaginative faculty. At the time of his prophesying the ordinary powers of the prophet are dormant and his senses annulled, all the while his soul is occupied with the reception of the prophecy. He will therefore report whatever he saw or heard, even though he had no influence on what his soul saw or prophesied [...]. With the Holy Spirit it is different, inasmuch as it does not cause any revelation of [visible] forms or parables, and it does not entail any loss of consciousness or sense reception. Rather, the prophet himself decides about the content of his words, be it words of wisdom, praise, rebuke, etc. And since a divine spirit assists him in speaking his words, this level is called the Holy Spirit. It is a preparatory level for prophecy.²⁷

Notwithstanding Abarbanel's general conclusion that "any piece of poetry [in the Bible] was written through the Holy Spirit upon the prophet's own initiative,"²⁸ the main purpose of this discussion is to rule out the possibility that Mosaic prophecy contains figurative speech, that is, speech that is less than completely lucid and understandable. But the Song does contain figurative speech, and since denying its Mosaic authorship is out of question (the Torah itself testifies to it²⁹), the only conceivable solution to this crux is to deny the song its prophetic essence. Having done this, Abarbanel could not ignore the problem of the inclusion of ordinary poetry in the Book of God: "It was Moses, may he rest in peace, who composed this song, but it was included in the Torah at divine behest."³⁰ This means, according to Abarbanel, that the prophetic essence and authority of the Song are not inferior to the rest of the Torah. It was God, the divine author of the Torah, who decided to include it, thus investing it with the same level of authority as the rest of the book.

In his introduction to the commentary on the book of Deuteronomy, Abarbanel deals at length with the questions of the authorship and purpose of this book, two questions that he finds to be closely interrelated. In what follows we shall do our best to isolate those aspects of the discussion that are relevant to our study – the authorship

²⁷ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 215.

²⁹ See n. 23 above.

³⁰ *Commentary on Exodus*, p. 215.

and authority of the book of Deuteronomy. The question arises in light of the tension between Moses' authorship of the book, which is written in the first person, and its being a part of the divine Torah, the sublime revelation of God:

I asked and inquired whether [...] the book of Deuteronomy was written by God and the words contained therein were written by Moses following divine revelation, as is the case with the rest of the Torah [...] or whether Moses wrote the book upon his own initiative [...]. If we adopt the first position [...] why, then, were the first four books written in the third person, while the book of Deuteronomy was written by Moses as one who speaks on his own behalf [=in the first person]? [...]. But if we accept the second position [...] how, then, could a book composed by Moses possibly be included among the Books of God?³¹

What is at stake is not the apparent displacement of a single psalm or a book that was written through the Holy Spirit. Here the question revolves around the authority of one of the five books of the Torah. Abarbanel's repetitious answer to the problems elaborated above shows that he considered them to be especially grave:

The truth concerning this book is that our Master Moses uttered its words [...] and after their completion, God desired that they be written in the Torah [...]. Therefore, even though Moses formulated all these words [...] their inclusion in the Torah was God's exclusive decision, like all the words of the Torah [...]. God therefore said them to Moses and initiated that he [=Moses] write them down, and he wrote them down in obedience to a divine decree and not upon his own initiative.³²

Abarbanel's solution to the problem of the authorship of the book of Deuteronomy is not meant to stress the human element in the creation of the book.³³ On the contrary, it is meant to establish its absolute

³¹ *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ Yaakov Elman ("The book of Deuteronomy as Revelation: Nachmanides and Abarbanel," in Y. Elman and J.S. Gurock [eds.], *Hazon Nahum* (New York 1997), pp. 229-250) erroneously reached the opposite conclusion, namely, that in Abarbanel's opinion, Moses edited existing, divinely revealed material, thus

divine authority, like the rest of the Torah. Thus Abarbanel stresses toward the end of his introduction that “anyone who claims that even one of the Torah’s verses was written by Moses upon his own initiative, without being commanded to do so by God, of him it is said that ‘he has despised the word of God’ (Num 15:31).”³⁴

Just as the divine command plays a crucial role in elevating a work composed by a mere human to the realm of prophecy, its absence plays a crucial role in explaining why a book containing prophecies nevertheless does not carry prophetic authority. In the first part of his messianic trilogy, *Ma‘ayanei ha-Yeshu‘ah* (Fountains of Salvation), a commentary on the book of Daniel, Abarbanel discusses the prophetic level of Daniel. His point of departure is the opinion of Maimonides that Daniel wrote his book through the Holy Spirit, like the rest of the authors of the Writings. This claim Abarbanel finds entirely implausible:

If this were true, I would like to know how Daniel in his dream could possibly reach a [prophetic] level where he had true visions of the four empires all in complete accordance with the way things actually evolved: the conquest of the different lands in accordance with their true order, the exile, redemption, and successes of the [Jewish] nation for thousands of years, the number of kings that would rule over Rome and over Persia, the wars of Alexander against Darius, his premature death, the division of his empire [...]. A reasonable person cannot possibly think that all this happened [...] without any [divine] inspiration reaching the intellect.³⁵

attributing considerable if not exaggerated authority to Scripture’s human editor. Elman begins by stating that Abarbanel “takes great pains to minimize” Deuteronomy’s human side (p. 231), but then proceeds to reach a series of contrary conclusions, because he understood the Hebrew verb לַסְדֵּר as referring to some sort of editing or rearrangement of an existing text, even though Abarbanel often applies it to primary composition. For example, the Song of the Sea is מְפֹעֵל הַגְּבִיא וְסִדְרָו (Commentary on Exodus, p. 215) – “the work of the prophet and his composition.” Elman bolstered his case by an invalid analogy to the Song of David. In Elman’s account of Abarbanel’s views, David edited a psalm originally found in the prophets; hence, the psalm was written through prophecy, and its inclusion in the Writings is taken as a further indication of Abarbanel’s willingness to allow for human interference with the word of God. However, Elman misconstrued Abarbanel’s views.

³⁴ *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, p. 10.

³⁵ *Ma‘ayanei ha-Yeshu‘ah*, pp. 290-291.

Abarbanel's solution to this difficulty brings his whole system close to absurdity; indeed, one finds indications that he realized his solution was not entirely convincing:

Daniel spoke through the Holy Spirit from the point of view of the composition of the book and its writing. But he was a prophet from the point of view of the visions he had, which were all full-fledged prophecy.³⁶

This solution follows the logic of the rest of the cases analyzed above – the authority of the book depends on the authority of the one who decided that it should be written (Daniel) and not on the one who dictated its contents in the first place (God). Yet we sense that in this case, Abarbanel's claim runs counter to the logic of coherent religious thought. How could it be that God revealed the entire future of the Jewish nation to Daniel but did not command him to write down his prophecy?

Abarbanel concedes that from the point of view of three of its four Aristotelian causes, the book is comparable to the books of the prophets. Its efficient cause, Daniel, was, as we have seen, a prophet. Also its material cause does not deviate from the material cause of many of the prophets: "The substance of the visions that are mentioned in this book [...] is the clarification of the rule of the four empires that ruled over the world and oppressed the people of Israel [...]. And you should know that the subject matter of the four empires is not peculiar to this book, since it is found in the words of many prophets."³⁷ And also the final cause of the book is no different from the final cause of many prophetic books: "Daniel's intention when writing this book was to exemplify his wisdom, his level of prophecy, his utmost holiness, and the miracles that were enacted for his sake and for the sake of his friends; and to write down the future of the nation, with its exiles and calamities and salvations and future redemption, as did the rest of the prophets [...]. But he did not do this [=stressing his own wisdom, holiness, etc.] because of pride and haughtiness, God forbid. Rather, this was the will of Providence with regard to the prophets, so that they may succeed in convincing the people."³⁸ How, then, can Abarbanel claim that the book's formal

³⁶ Ibid., p. 292.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 284.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 277.

cause (the inspirational level through which it was written) was not prophetic?

In contrast to all the other cases analyzed in this study, where Abarbanel stated his arguments with great self-confidence and with no need for further proof, here he sounds insecure, and the arguments are rather weak:

It can be compared to the book of Chronicles that is found among the Writings even though it reports prophecies that were uttered by the prophets. This is the case regarding this book also – it belongs to the Writings from the point of view of its composition, but it relates prophecies that Daniel saw and prophesied at that time. Furthermore, the Master and Guide has already written that “[...] it is possible for a prophet to prophesy [at one time] on one level and at another time at a lower level.”³⁹ This might be what happened to Daniel – in the beginning he spoke through the Holy Spirit, and in his old age he saw godly visions through the level of prophecy, of which he was subsequently deprived so that he wrote his book through the Holy Spirit alone.⁴⁰

The second argument, that prophets may prophecy on different levels at different times, hardly explains why God would have revealed the great secrets of the future of the nation to Daniel if He didn't wish them to be written down. The first argument, the comparison with the book of Chronicles, discloses more than anything else Abarbanel's doubts regarding the nature of the book of Daniel. The book of Chronicles can contain prophecies without being prophetic itself, because it adapts those prophecies to its own purposes as a historiographical work, which Ezra the Scribe wrote on his own initiative. So too, Abarbanel stresses, the book of Daniel “relates prophecies that Daniel saw and prophesied at that time,”⁴¹ as if it were a book of history that mentions the prophecies of Daniel along with other stories about him. But this is exactly the approach that Abarbanel had rejected in his introduction to the book, before he defined its “final cause” as the revelation of the future (and the stories about Daniel's greatness and holiness as a means to persuade the people with regard to the truth of his prophecies):

³⁹ *Guide for the Perplexed*, II, chap. 45.

⁴⁰ *Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'ah*, p. 292.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Do not think for a moment that the subject matter of this book is comparable to the subject matter of the book of Chronicles, and that Daniel intended to relate the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia and Babylon [...]. Rather Daniel's intention in this book was to exemplify his wisdom [...] and to write down the future of the nation.⁴²

These words seem to reflect Abarbanel's true or original approach to the book. The book of Daniel is not a book of history; it is a book of prophecy. It was written by a prophet, and its purpose and subject matter are identical to those of other prophetic books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. But later on, when faced with the question of the book's proper location within the biblical corpus, Abarbanel became more fully aware of the problematic implications of this approach. A book of prophecy that was written through the Holy Spirit? This anomaly forced Abarbanel to change his approach and relate to the book of Daniel as a book of history that was written through the Holy Spirit, like the book of Chronicles.

Exceptions to the Rule?

In two instances one might get the impression that Abarbanel does relate to a text as if it had been placed in a section of the Bible inconsistent with its true level of prophetic authority. However, a thorough analysis of these two instances refutes that impression.

In the second "investigation" of the introduction to the Former Prophets, in his discussion of the material cause of the books,⁴³ Abarbanel asks: if the Former Prophets are dedicated to narrating the past, while the Latter Prophets are dedicated to foretelling the future, why are some of the stories presented in the Former Prophets retold in the Latter Prophets? Abarbanel makes it clear that he refers to (1) the repetition of the chapters that begin with the siege on Jerusalem by Sennacherib and conclude with the death of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:17-20:19) in the book of Isaiah (36-39), and (2) the double repetition of the stories of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (2 Kings 25) in the book of Jeremiah (39-41; 52).

Abarbanel's answer is based on a principle that he frequently applies in his exegetical writings: the subordination of one text to

⁴² Ibid., p. 277.

⁴³ *Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, pp. 20-23.

another. While the stories were presented in the Former Prophets “for their own sake,” that is, in order to narrate, they were incorporated in the Latter Prophets by the (prophetic) authors of those books in order to elaborate on certain aspects of the prophecies. In other words, the narratives are subordinate to the prophecies, and the different literary genres are only mingled *prima facie*.⁴⁴ But with regard to the last chapter of Jeremiah, which contains the second repetition of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, it seems that

these are not the words of Jeremiah, nor did he write those episodes. The proof of this is that before this section, at the end of the preceding verses, it says: “so far the words of Jeremiah” (Jer 51:64), which means that what follows is not the words of Jeremiah. It appears that it was Ezra the Scribe or the Men of the Great Assembly who, after having collected the books of Scripture and arranged their order, saw fit to copy those chapters from the book of Kings and write them at the end of the book of Jeremiah. And it seems to me that they did this for two reasons: first, in order to inform the reader about the destruction of the Temple and the exile that Jeremiah prophesied in that same book, so as to demonstrate the truth of his words and the fulfillment of his prophecies [...]. And the second reason is that the story of the destruction might serve as background to the prophecies of Ezekiel that took place after the destruction.

It was Ezra the Scribe (the non-prophetic author of the books of Ezra-Nehemia and Chronicles) or the Men of the Great Assembly (who

⁴⁴ For the subject of subordination in Christian exegesis from the thirteenth century onwards and its origins in the Aristotelian theory of the subordination of the sciences to one another, see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, London 1984, pp. 145-159 (henceforth: Minnis, *Attitudes*). The alert reader will notice that the change in Abarbanel’s approach to the book of Daniel entails a change in the subordination of the book’s parts to one another. When stressing the book’s prophetic purposes, he stresses the subordination of its stories about Daniel’s greatness to its overall prophetic purpose. In contrast, when stressing that it was written through the Holy Spirit, he views the prophecies as subordinate to the historical framework of the book.

came after the last prophets⁴⁵) who added the aforementioned chapters to the prophetic book of Jeremiah.

Are we then to conclude that the prophetic corpus nevertheless contains a text that was not included based on a divine command and therefore must be considered non-prophetic? Not at all, because Abarbanel probably never regarded the addition of the historical chapters to Jeremiah as a new literary creation that would make Jeremiah a compound work. Rather, for Abarbanel the book of Jeremiah remains an independent, prophetic work, since the addition of the historical chapters took place “after the collection of the books and their arrangement,” that is, at the editorial level.

The second instance appears even more challenging than the first, since here Abarbanel himself explicitly suggests that a work found in the Writings might actually have been written through prophetic inspiration and following a divine command, so that it should be regarded as a prophetic work. After stating that the book of Ruth was written by Samuel on the prophet’s own initiative, Abarbanel also suggests an alternative view:

Because Samuel did it [=wrote the book of Ruth] on his own initiative, in order to honor David and relate his lineage, and there was no prior divine command to do so, and the things he related were known to him from tradition and not through prophecy – for all these reasons the sages were in possession of a tradition that it was written through the Holy Spirit and not through prophecy. They therefore included it among the Writings, in accordance with the inspirational level at which it was written according to their opinion. But I myself have another explanation for this: Even if we admit that the book of

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, Version A, chap. 1: “The Men of the Great Assembly received the Oral Tradition from Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.” Opinions differ widely as to the identity and essence of this body of Sages, ranging from the claim that they were “the supreme judicial authority of the Pharisees in its time” (Louis Finkelstein, “The Men of the Great Synagogue [circa 400-170 B.C.E.],” in W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein [eds.], *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 2, Cambridge 1984, p. 229) to the claim “that the name was created by Mishnaic masters interested in establishing a continuous chain of authority from Moses to the Pharisees” (Ira Jeffrey Schiffer, “The Men of the Great Assembly,” in William Scott Green [ed.], *Persons and Institutions in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, Montana 1977, p. 270). On the origins of the view of the Men of the Great Assembly as the redactors of the biblical canon, see Leiman, *Canonization*, p. 196, n. 589.

Ruth was at the level of the book of Judges – that it was made through prophecy, by command and by divine revelation, like the rest of the prophetic books⁴⁶ – since Samuel intended to honor David,⁴⁷ the sages saw fit to join it to the book of Psalms, which was written by David, in order to relate his lineage. And for the sake of this joining, it was placed among the Writings, even though its level was prophetic. And the sages have already commented on this in the first chapter of Bava Batra (14b), where they determined that “the order of the Writings is Ruth, Psalms, Job [...]”⁴⁸

How are we to relate to Abarbanel’s claim that the book of Ruth might have been placed in the wrong section of Bible for reasons that seem less than compelling – in order to join the story of the lineage of David to the book that he wrote? Although according to Abarbanel the Talmudic Sages did not fix the order of books in the biblical canon, but this was done by an earlier body of sages – the Men of the Great Assembly – here Abarbanel appears to hint that the Sages of the Talmud might have altered the order they had received: they “saw fit to join” the book of Ruth to the book of Psalms.⁴⁹

Modifying the Maimonidean-Duranian Approach

In his endeavors to vindicate the Jewish tripartite division of the biblical corpus in its prophetic interpretation, Abarbanel offered a solution that *ipso facto* had to entail some modification of the earlier approach. Abarbanel fully accepted the distinction that Maimonides had drawn between the three principal classes of inspiration that went into the making of Scripture – the prophecy of Moses, the prophecy of

⁴⁶ It seems that for reasons yet to be explained, Abarbanel did not feel completely at ease with the first solution, that the book of Ruth was written through the Holy Spirit and not through prophecy.

⁴⁷ This is a peculiar statement. If the book is prophetic in all its aspects, its writing as well as its content must reflect the intentions of its divine author, not those of the prophet. So far we have found no satisfying explanation of this inconsistency.

⁴⁸ *Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ This seems to be the case also regarding the book of Isaiah, which the Talmud (BT Bava Batra 14b) places after the book of Ezekiel. In his introduction to the commentary on Isaiah (*Commentary on Latter Prophets*, p. 3), Abarbanel questions the rationale for the placement provided by the Talmud, thus indicating that in his opinion the Talmudic sages had altered the original, chronological order.

all other prophets, and the Holy Spirit. But since according to Abarbanel the initial inspirational level of the spiritual or literary creation does not determine the prophetic essence of the completed literary work, the distinction between levels of prophecy cannot serve as basis for the division of scripture, as Profiat Duran would have it.

Significantly, so far we have been exposed only to the distinction between two levels – prophetic or non-prophetic essence. We have seen how Abarbanel deals with the presence of non-prophetic material in prophetic books (the Song of David in the book of Samuel, the Song of the Sea and the book of Deuteronomy in the Torah) and the presence of prophetic material in non-prophetic books (prophecies in the books of Daniel and Chronicles). But we have found no discussion of the apparent displacement of texts to indicate the difference between the prophetic essence and authority of the Torah and that of the Prophets. The reason for this will become clear in light of Abarbanel's redefinition of the principles at work in the tripartite division of Scripture in the first "investigation" of the introduction to the Former Prophets.⁵⁰

Abarbanel held that the Talmudic sages divided the existing order of the books into three sections and gave each section its special name ("our holy Sages divided Scripture into three major parts and named them Law, Prophets, and Writings").⁵¹ Accordingly the first "investigation" asks how these names reflect the differences between the parts. Having raised the question, Abarbanel does not answer it immediately. First he cites verbatim from the words of Duran, on which he comments that "although 'the words from a wise man's mouth are gracious' (Eccl 10:12), he has not resolved the doubts that I raised, he did not rise to explain the specific names that our Sages designated for Scripture's different parts." In other words, although Duran was perfectly correct about the different levels of prophecy found in scripture, this difference does not underlie the tripartite division. In Abarbanel's opinion, "by the names they gave, the sages wished to express the [specific] perfection of each of the parts and their highest merits." In light of our previous discussion, Abarbanel's discussion of the merits of the Prophets and the Writings contains nothing that should surprise us at this stage of the discussion:

⁵⁰ *Commentary on Joshua-Judges*, p. 7-9.

⁵¹ But see also *Commentary on the Guide*, II, chap. 36, according to which this division was the work of the Men of the Great Assembly.

The books of the prophets they called Prophets [...] in order to clarify their merits and to distinguish them from the Writings in that they were composed by prophets, as opposed to the Writings, that were conceived through the Holy Spirit. Behold, they were not called Prophecies, because also the book of Chronicles contains prophecies, although it was not composed by prophets and is not considered a prophetic book [...]. One might add that they were also not called Prophecies because the greater part of them is dedicated to relating the events that occurred in those times, as in most of [the books of] Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings and parts of [the books of] Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; and since this has nothing to do with telling the future, they were not called Prophecies, which is the [generic] name for the telling of the future [...]. And the books of those who speak through the Holy Spirit they called Writings [...] in order to clarify their level of inspiration [...] a divine matter that clings to a man, arousing and encouraging him in wondrous ways to speak or to write words of poetry and praise or words of wisdom [...]. Thus the name Writings was not intended to signify that those words were written down and did not exist orally only, but that they were written through the Holy Spirit.

By mentioning the book of Chronicles and the prophecies related therein, Abarbanel makes it clear that the divine command to write a book is what makes it prophetic (“they were composed by prophets”), not the level of inspiration through which the prophecy itself was conceived. Furthermore, he emphasizes that a book can be prophetic even though it does not contain prophecies of the future, that is, prophecy as a literary genre. In other words, this passage already hints at the three cumulative “prophetic” criteria upon which Abarbanel was to elaborate in his second “investigation” – the book must be written by a prophet, it must be written following a divine command, and it must contain knowledge obtainable only through divine revelation but not necessarily knowledge about the future. The name Prophets therefore hints at the special merits of those books in comparison with the Writings – they fulfill all the prophetic criteria. In the same manner the name Writings signifies the merit of those books in comparison with ordinary books – “they were written through the Holy Spirit.”

How does Abarbanel introduce a third and higher category of prophetic authority into a distinction that seems to be essentially binary, between books that were written following divine decree and books that were written upon human initiative? His words on this point are, admittedly, not easy to decipher. Abarbanel himself might have experienced some difficulty in expressing his intentions clearly, due to the novelty of his ideas. Nevertheless, we believe that a proper understanding of Abarbanel's words is possible, especially because their general gist (at least to some measure) is to be expected:

They desired to distinguish the divine law from the rest of the Holy Books by virtue of its being superior to them with regard to the quality of the abundance. But since it does not differ from them with regard to the narration of past events (many prophets narrated the past), and it also does not differ from them with regard to the telling of the future (the rest of the prophets also told the future), and since the Torah's essential superiority consists in the commandments that were given through our Master Moses (and not one single commandment was given through another prophet) [...] they named this book, which contains the divine commandments, Law.

Abarbanel speaks, on the one hand, about the quality of the divine abundance, which immediately leads one to think about the classical distinction between different levels of prophecy and the absolute superiority of Mosaic prophecy. However, this understanding is rapidly ruled out when Abarbanel relates to the different genres of Scripture and determines that with regard to two of them, prophecy and historiography, the Torah is not superior to the other prophetic books. This is surely a surprising claim, and it makes clear that the superior authority of the Torah, which justified classifying it as a separate section of the Bible, does not derive from the metaphysically superior nature of Mosaic prophecy (on which Abarbanel, as explained, did not cast doubt).

A conspicuous feature of the passage just cited is Abarbanel's repeated comparison of Moses to the rest of the prophets. But if the superiority of the book of Moses is not related to the level of his prophetic inspiration, then it must have something to do with the authority on which he wrote the book. The authority to write a book of commandments, to legislate, constitutes a higher level of authority than the authority to write a book of prophecy or historiography.

Therefore Abarbanel emphasizes that not a single commandment was given through another prophet. Even though the prophecy of Moses was on a higher level, the authority with which he was invested to write both prophecies of the future and historiography was identical to the authority with which the rest of the prophetic authors of prophecy and historiography were invested. Only when writing down the commandments, the quintessential constituent of Judaism, was he invested with a higher degree of authority. This seems to us to be the most likely explanation of Abarbanel's words here in light of his approach to the tripartite division of Scripture as demonstrated in the present study.

Building on Contemporary and Earlier Foundations

In the history of ideas there are no completely new creations, only original developments of already existing patterns of thought. Abarbanel's solution to the problem of Scripture's tripartite division is based on his extremely developed awareness of the fact that texts have a history, that they are based on earlier oral or written traditions, a prophecy or a poem, and that even complete literary units can be revised, edited, rearranged, and combined into more inclusive or compound literary creations. This awareness, so dominant in Abarbanel's exegesis, enabled him to "postpone" the decisive moment in imparting divine authority to a given text to the final stage of its creation and thus to sever it completely from the inspirational level, prophetic or other, that went into the initial spiritual creation.

The breadth of Abarbanel's knowledge was by all standards impressive,⁵² and the diversity of his sources no less so. Bible, Talmud, church fathers, ancient Roman historians and Greek philosophers, high and late medieval Bible commentaries, theologians and philosophers (Jewish and Christian), Maimonidean commentaries, medieval Hebrew grammarians, lexicographers, poets, unnamed contemporaries, and more are cited on every single page of Abarbanel's vast literary *oeuvre*, some frequently and others rarely. These facts understandably turn the whole question of Abarbanel's sources and influences into a highly complex issue. Nevertheless we believe that it is possible to point out what, in the present context,

⁵² According to Louis Rabinowitz ("Abravanel as Exegete," in B. Trend and H. Loewe [eds.], *Isaac Abravanel – Six Lectures*, Cambridge 1937, p. 79) "a claim could be made out for Abravanel as one of the most learned men of his time, both in Hebrew and in secular knowledge."

must have constituted some of the major stimuli for Abarbanel's views and methodologies.

With regard to the general cultural background of principal aspects of Abarbanel's theorizing on the literary history of the Bible (as expressed especially in his introductions to the books of the Former Prophets), Eleazar Gutwirth⁵³ has convincingly traced it to the Iberian vernacular humanism of the fifteenth century. Important aspects of Abarbanel's theorizing that seem inspired by the literary-cultural trends of his time and place may appropriately be summarized in Gutwirth's words:

He is interested in questions of literary history and theory; when dealing with books, albeit sacred books, he is interested in their names, divisions, inclusion and exclusion, reader's "comfort," convenience or response. He is also interested in the historical of writing. He confronts parallel texts, lists omissions, variants, repetitions. He elaborates lists and classifies types of writing.⁵⁴

In the more specific realm of biblical exegesis, the commentaries of the Catholic theologian Alphonso Tostado seem to contain a major key to the understanding of Abarbanel's analyses of the literary dimension of the Bible. In fact, the discovery by the late Salomon Gaon that the commentaries of Abarbanel on the Pentateuch disclose indubitable traces of Tostado's influence,⁵⁵ might well prove to be of profound importance for future studies on Abarbanel's exegesis.

⁵³ Eleazar Gutwirth, "Don Ishaq Abravanel and Vernacular Humanism in Fifteenth Century Iberia," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 60 (1998), pp. 641-671.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 656. For further discussion of the Renaissance background of Abarbanel's views on literary questions as well as important aspects of his novel, critical approach to the Bible, see Eric Lawee, "Historical Thinking, Critical Reading, and the Study of Classical Jewish Texts," in *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue*, New York 2001, pp. 173-186 (henceforth: Lawee, *Stance*). For an important summary of the influence of the Renaissance on Abarbanel, see *ibid.*, "Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship," in Magne Sæbø, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, vol. 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, Göttingen 2008, pp. 201-211 (henceforth: Lawee, *Scholarship*).

⁵⁵ Salomon Gaon, *The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abravanel*, New York 1993.

Gaon's discovery was followed up by Eric Lawee, who referred to Tostado's introduction to the book of Joshua when remarking that

Like Abarbanel, Tostado attempted to define the "prophetic genre," concluding, for instance, that a book composed by a prophet was not necessarily prophetic *per se* [...]. It is likely that Tostado's ruminations on scriptural genres and content-categories stimulated Abarbanel's thinking about such topics, though the extent of Abarbanel's interactions with these remains to be researched.⁵⁶

We dare say that further inquiry into the Tostado nexus shows that the Christian theologian and commentator went beyond merely "stimulat[ing] Abarbanel's thinking about such topics".⁵⁷ Tostado dealt with the Bible's literary history and structure in many of the introductions to his biblical commentaries. The length and extent of Tostado's discussions make Abarbanel's discussions, which seem long-winded when compared to the Jewish exegetical tradition, look like brief summaries. And in some sense, this is what they are. But only in some sense, since Abarbanel's many borrowings from Tostado do not seem to have stood in the way of the latter's originality and independence of thought.

In this connection we would like to draw attention to Tostado's exposition on Jerome's prologue to 1 Samuel (called 1 Kings in Christian tradition). In this exposition, which Tostado himself considered to be "complete on this material",⁵⁸ the bishop relates to some thirty-five questions relating to the formation of the Bible in its different aspects. Most relevant to our current issue is the twentieth question,⁵⁹ which opens with the words:

Why ought all these books [=the Former Prophets] be designated prophetic books, and which books are prophetic,

⁵⁶ Lawee, *Scholarship*, p. 208.

⁵⁷ When trying to explain why Abarbanel never mentions Tostado explicitly, Gaon (p. ix) went so far as to assume that "the influence of Tostado on Abarbanel was so general and universal that it was impossible for him to state when he was following the Catholic theologian and when he was not."

⁵⁸ Alphonsi Tostati, *Commentaria in Primam Partem Matthæi*, Venice 1596, p. 3a.

⁵⁹ Alphonsi Tostati, *Commentaria in Primam Partem I. Regum*, Venice 1596, pp. 12b-13a.

and which aren't? And concerning their being called prophetic, is this because they contain prophecies or because they were written by prophets?

Elaborating further on this question, Tostado, who, like Jerome, operated with the tripartite, Jewish division of Scripture, and not with the traditional Christian quadripartite division,⁶⁰ explains that since prophecy consists in predicting the future (here he obviously gives voice to popular conceptions with the aim of ultimately refuting them, as Abarbanel did after him), the Former Prophets, being books of history, seem to have been wrongly located in the second order of the canon. There are some, Tostado continues, who have solved this problem by pointing at the traditional Christian view of the Scriptures as possessing figurative meaning, viz., that the description of past events prefigures future events, and in this sense the historical books are also prophetic. But this possibility must be rejected, since the books of the third, non-prophetic order of the Bible, the Hagiographa (not least the book of Job), are also characterized by the narrative mode but were not included among the prophetic books.

At this point Tostado introduces the view of the twelfth century commentator Hugo of St. Victor, whom he mentions by name, according to which a book may be deemed prophetic for two (independent) reasons – being written in prophetic style or being written by a prophet. The Former Prophets fulfill the second criterion⁶¹ and are therefore considered prophetic books. Tostado relates that there are some people who have rejected Hugh's view because Daniel and David, the author of the Book of Psalms, were

⁶⁰ This is not surprising, insofar as most Christian Old Testament manuscripts in Spain followed this arrangement (see David Coles, "Humanism and the Bible in Renaissance Spain and Italy: Antonio de Nebrija [1441-1522]," Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1983, p. 17).

⁶¹ According to Tostado, Samuel wrote the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, and the first part of Kings [=Samuel]. David continued from there (=1 Sam 25:1, where Samuel's death is mentioned) and wrote until the end of 2 Kings (=2 Samuel). But 3 and 4 (=1 and 2 Kings) were written by Jeremiah. These attributions of authorship are conspicuously close to those of Abarbanel, who only substitutes David, whom he did not consider a prophet, for Nathan and Gad; see n. 5 above. And in light of the fact that Abarbanel's discussion on the authorship of the book of Deuteronomy (see *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, pp. 5-11) was also anticipated by Tostado (see *Commentaria in Deuteronomium*, Venice 1596, pp. 2b-3a) it seems that the originality of his "biblical criticism" (see Lawee, *Stance*, pp. 173-184) would benefit from a re-evaluation.

also prophets,⁶² but their books were nevertheless included in the Hagiographa. Other theologians defended Hugh by delving deeper into the nature and definitions of prophecy, maintaining that on the most basic level (or as Tostado puts it, most broadly), prophecy is knowledge of hidden facts by virtue of divine revelation, regardless of whether these facts pertain to the future, the present, or even the past, like Moses' account of Creation, which could only have been known to a human being by revelation. Less broadly speaking, prophecy is defined as predicting the future by means of words or events that prefigure it, and, most particularly, prophecy means predicting the future "in modum futuri." With regard to the second definition, the term "prophecy" refers more specifically to prediction by way of symbolic enactment (figures) than to foretelling the future in mere words. Now, Psalms and Daniel do contain some predictions of things to come, and from this point of view they could be considered prophetic. However, in contrast to the Former Prophets, they do not do this by relating past events,⁶³ which explains why they were included in a different section of the Bible. This solution, however, is rejected by Tostado, who argues that the Book of Daniel fulfills the third definition of prophecy, predicting the future in the future tense, and should therefore have been included among the Prophets.

Having examined the issue from the perspectives of the books' literary genres, their authors' prophetic authority, their spiritual (figurative) sense, and the definition and essence of prophecy itself, Tostado mentions yet another opinion, based on an analysis of the workings of the prophetic mission. According to this opinion, three kinds of people are called prophets – those sent by the people to ask God about the state of the nation by means of the *ephod*; those to whom facts which are unknown by tradition and not attainable by ordinary human cognition are revealed; and those sent by God to promulgate messages imparted through inspiration. To the first class belong only priestly prophets. Daniel and David, the author of Psalms, belong only to the second class, but not to the third class, and were therefore included in a section of their own. After presenting this

⁶² On the way in which David came to be regarded as one of the greatest prophets in the Christian tradition (so great that Thomas Aquinas [*Summa Theologica* 2, II, q. 174, a. 4] felt a need to raise the question whether he was greater than Moses), see Minnis, *Attitudes*, pp. 42-48; James Kugel, "David the Prophet," in James Kugel (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, New York 1990, pp. 45-55.

⁶³ Since Psalms does it through hymns and Daniel through visions.

opinion, Tostado dismisses it, because the authors of the Former Prophets were never sent to convey the messages contained in their books.

After this thorough discussion, Tostado concludes that the view of Hugh of St. Victor is true: a book is deemed prophetic if it was written by a prophet or in the prophetic mode, and the Former Prophets, of course, fulfill the first criterion. Tostado rounds off the discussion by rebutting possible (and perhaps also actual) objections to this conclusion, and his arguments can be summarized as follows: The Law of Moses, even though it was written by a prophet, carries such superior authority⁶⁴ that it constitutes a class in and by itself – the Law. The book of Job is also attributed by some to Moses, but since there are others who doubt its Mosaic authorship,⁶⁵ it is of dubious authority and belongs therefore to the Hagiographa.⁶⁶ The book of Psalms is included in that same category because it was not written by David alone. Ten authors contributed to this collection⁶⁷ (which was edited by Ezra the Scribe), and the prophetic authority of all of them has not been established. The book of Daniel was indeed written by an acclaimed prophet, but he enjoys less authority among the Jews than the rest of the prophets, and his book is therefore to be found in the Hagiographa.

The points of contact between Tostado and Abarbanel are numerous. Both were disturbed by the question of what constitutes the

⁶⁴ On the centrality of the concept of *auctoritas* in the Christian medieval tradition, see Minnis, *Attitudes*, pp. 10-12.

⁶⁵ In his introduction to the book of Joshua (*Commentaria in Primam Partem Iosue*, Venice 1596, p. 2a) Tostado attributed the book of Job to Moses without reservations. It therefore seems that between the commentary on Joshua and the commentary on Samuel Tostado had deepened his knowledge of the Talmudic tradition concerning the authorship of the book of Job. The Talmud (BT Bava Batra 15a-b) presents a lengthy discussion of whether Job lived at the time of Moses or whether he lived at a later time (the time of Ahasuerus and Esther or of the deliverance from the Babylonian exile). According to the latter two possibilities, Moses obviously could not have written the book.

⁶⁶ Cf. Minnis, *Attitudes*, p. 11: “To be ‘authentic’, a saying or a piece of writing had to be the genuine production of a named *auctor*. Works of unknown or uncertain authorship were regarded as ‘apocryphal’ and believed to possess an *auctoritas* far inferior to that of works which circulated under the names of *auctores*.”

⁶⁷ Here Tostado follows Jerome, who “affirmed his belief in the multiple authorship of the Psalter, a view which was consistently ignored or rejected by many twelfth-century scholars” (Minnis, *Attitudes*, p. 43).

essence of a book's prophetic authority, and both insist that this question must be investigated from every possible angle (author, genre, content, etc.) before it can be adequately answered. Like Tostado, Abarbanel also posits prophetic authorship as a criterion for prophetic authority, and another criterion of Abarbanel's, knowledge of the hidden, is repeatedly referred to by Tostado as a definition of prophecy. Most conspicuous of all, though, is Abarbanel's embrace of Tostado's principle of different levels of authority as the basis for the division of Scripture.

In light of this, it might be objected that rather than being a modification of the Maimonidean approach, as argued above, Abarbanel's approach is wholly Tostadian. Nonetheless, Abarbanel's views still retain a pronounced Maimonidean flavor. While Tostado speaks about unspecified higher and lower levels of prophetic authority, Abarbanel's categories retain the rigor of the Maimonidean distinctions among levels of prophetic inspiration. As a parallel to Maimonides' definition of Mosaic prophecy as being essentially superior to all other kinds of prophecy, Abarbanel (unlike Tostado) ties the superior authority of the Books of Moses to the practical commandments contained therein. To an observant Jew, the practical commandments as included in the Torah and as interpreted by rabbinic tradition carry an authority that is absolutely superior and essentially incomparable to the authority of any words of doom, admonition, or even comfort that might be uttered by even the greatest of prophets, including Moses himself. The rigor of Maimonides' distinction between prophecy and the Holy Spirit also has its parallel in Abarbanel's distinction between books that were written at divine behest and books that were written upon the authors' own initiative. According to Tostado, in contrast, non-prophetic works and prophetic works of lesser authority (Daniel) are to be found in the same subsection.

It now becomes clear that Abarbanel combined the Maimonidean and Tostadian approaches by positing a third prophetic criterion, according to which the authority of a book depends on the authority by which it was written, not the nature of the author's prophecy or the level of his authority. This criterion cannot be traced back to Tostado, who associated the authority of a book completely and exclusively

with the authority of its author⁶⁸ and his level of inspiration/authority at the time of the book's conception.⁶⁹

With regard to the distinction between uttering a word and including it in a biblical work, an important late medieval precedent comes to mind. In his discussion of the inclusion of the Song of David in the book of Samuel, Abarbanel justified the inclusion of non-prophetic poetry in a prophetic book by pointing out that "not all that is said and told in the books of the prophets necessarily has to be uttered originally through prophecy, seeing that the words of the kings, the priests, the officials, and the ordinary people are also included there, and they were not all prophets, nor were their words uttered in prophecy." A similar distinction, relating to both the actions and the words of biblical personages, is found in the eleventh chapter of R. Joseph ibn Kaspi's *Sefer ha-Sod* (Book of the Secret, 1318), in which he sneers at people who tend to assign supreme purposefulness to all the actions of biblical figures:

It is the way of the masses to search for a higher purpose in every action that they find attested in Scripture, no matter who performed it [...]. Thus previous commentators toiled to interpret the trial of Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, as if he were our master Moses; the story of the mandrakes of Rachel and Leah as if they were Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Akiva; and the words of Reuben "put my two sons to death" (Gen 42:37) as if he were Aristotle [...]. If someone were to object that it is unlikely that the Torah would narrate actions that serve no purpose, I will answer you: *although the one who carried out*

⁶⁸ This is further borne out by his discussion in the twenty-first question of his preface to 1 Kings (=1 Samuel) (p. 13a-14b). Tostado asks whether all of Scripture ought to be considered prophetic, seeing that the books were lost in the wake of the Babylonian conquest, and it was Ezra the Prophet (!) who restored them after the return from the exile. In his answer Tostado rejects outright the notion that a book's prophetic status could possibly depend on anyone but its original author, denying authority to translators, restorers, and editors.

⁶⁹ In his introduction to the book of Joshua (*Commentaria in Primam partem Iosue*, Venice 1596, p. 2a), Tostado airs the view that prophets might write non-prophetic works (Moses wrote Job, Samuel wrote Ruth, and Jeremiah wrote Lamentations), thus hinting that prophets might be infused with different levels of authority at different times. As indicated, this was also the view of Maimonides, and Abarbanel took it further: a text can be conceived on a certain level of inspiration and be committed to writing on another.

the action had no necessary purpose in mind, it was included in the Torah for a necessary purpose (emphasis added).⁷⁰

Abarbanel translates the distinction between the purposes of the biblical agents and those of the biblical authors into a distinction between levels of authority. This is a legitimate interpretation with which Ibn Kaspi would undoubtedly concur. The servant of Abraham was no prophet, but the author of the Torah was. When taken to their logical end, these ideas can be applied to the words of prophets and inspired poets as well, and this was, as we have seen, what Abarbanel did.

It is more than likely that both ibn Kaspi and Abarbanel drew some inspiration from trends in Christian Bible exegesis of their time. From the thirteenth century onwards Christian exegetes were intensely occupied with questions of authorship and authority, and one of the questions that concerned them was how the divine science of theology can be based on lies and falsehoods found in the Bible.⁷¹ Many a scholar offered solutions reminiscent of the words of ibn Kaspi cited above. Thus, for example, Henry of Ghent writes in his *The Sum of Ordinary Questions*: “Whatever lies are found in Scripture, it does not proffer to us as being true by positively asserting their truth and commending them, but in reporting them in the text solely for our instruction.”⁷²

Even earlier, the twelfth century Jewish polymath, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, waged war against the homiletic, philologically unfounded exegesis current in his day. For example, in his commentary on Ruth 2:17, in his typically sharp-witted way, Ibn Ezra ridiculed a certain inquirer who insisted on deriving a deeper meaning from Scripture’s statement that Ruth had succeeded in gleaning from Boaz’ field “approximately one *ephah* of barley.” “The question is absurd,” Ibn Ezra exclaimed to his inquirer, “since Scripture only related what happened.” The inquirer himself then insisted on proposing an “impressive” series of far-fetched interpretations to which the rabbi chose not to respond, seeing that “it caused him [=the inquirer] satisfaction and put his mind to rest.” In his own commentary on Ruth,

⁷⁰ R. Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Sefer ha-Sod (Tirat Kesef)*, in *Mishneh Kesef*, ed. Isaac Last, Pressburg 1905, pp. 30-31.

⁷¹ See A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100 – c. 1375*, Oxford 1988, pp. 209-213.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 266.

Ibn Kaspi (who unlike Abarbanel⁷³ admired Ibn Ezra's sarcasm very much, but never quite attained the latter's highly sophisticated level of shrewdness) found nothing else to comment on this verse apart from the fact that "concerning this [verse] Ibn Ezra told an excellent joke about a pious but imbecilic man."

Summary and Conclusions

As exemplified in his inquiry into the inner logic of the division of Scripture, Abarbanel proves to have been an original thinker who wove together his many sources and traditions in an intricate interplay which, in the final analysis, resulted in a very personal and typically Abarbanelian approach.

Abarbanel's incentives do not seem to have been mainly polemical or apologetic. His critique of the Christian quadripartite division in the introduction to the Former Prophets is extremely brief, one might say rudimentary at best, and it seems to have been put forth *sine ira et studio*. In the rest of Abarbanel's commentaries cited in this study, neither the Christian division nor Tostado is mentioned. Had Abarbanel been moved by truly polemical motivations, he would have undertaken a much more systematic attack on the Christian position, as he in fact did in many other places throughout his writings.⁷⁴ But the question of the division of Scripture was never an important factor (if it was a factor at all) in the debate between the two religions as to which one of them reflects the true word of God, especially since in Abarbanel's place and time most Christians (including Tostado) tended to divide their Bibles more or less in agreement with the Talmudic tradition.⁷⁵

Cultural competition seems to be a more precise definition of what drove Abarbanel to invest considerable intellectual effort in solving a question that was never at the forefront of Jewish thought or exegesis. Tostado cites a host of different opinions concerning the division of Scripture and gives the impression that the issue was more widely discussed in Christian circles of fifteenth century Iberia. This could very well constitute the background for Abarbanel's complaint that

⁷³ Paraphrasing Job 34:7, Abarbanel derides Ibn Ezra for "being in the habit of drinking up mockery like water" (*Commentary on Exodus*, p. 311).

⁷⁴ For discussions on some of those places, see: Lawee, *Stance*, pp. 130-134, 191-194.

⁷⁵ See n. 60 above.

almost no Jewish scholar had put his mind to this question or solved it in a satisfactory manner.⁷⁶

Abarbanel the scholar is inseparable from Abarbanel the man of unshakeable conviction in the absolute truth of the Jewish faith. In many if not all of his scholarly endeavors one senses an underlying preoccupation with the vindication of Judaism in its different aspects, with showing its absolute truth and perfection.⁷⁷

Abarbanel agreed with Duran's basic argument, that in one way or the other the tripartite division of Scripture is based on distinctions between levels of prophetic inspiration, and that this was the view of the Talmudic sages as well. As a commentator he was well aware of the difficulties in applying this scheme to every single text in the Bible. But as a man of faith he felt that even this somewhat marginal problem could and should receive a consistent solution. It was a presumptuous undertaking, and in order to carry it out Abarbanel had to invent a novel criterion for determining the presence or absence of prophetic authority in biblical texts.

Abarbanel most probably became convinced of the truth of his newly discovered criterion because it enabled him to solve a variety of problems relating to the tripartite division of the biblical corpus. A poem or a speech uttered by Moses could be deemed prophetic in its specific context by virtue of subsequent divine sanction to include it in the Torah; a prophecy that was included in the book of Chronicles in order to serve the specific historiosophic aims of this particular work did not carry greater authority in its new context than that of the author of the entire, compound work; etc. Abarbanel apparently felt that there was no limit to the problems that could be solved with regard to the division of Scripture by the complete severance of a literary work's prophetic authority from the authority of the spiritual creation that served as its basis.

But in this he was mistaken! Even though from a methodological standpoint Abarbanel's solution can neither be proven nor decisively rejected, at a certain point it nevertheless loses its power of persuasion, due to external considerations. His claim that God revealed to Daniel the entire future of the Jewish nation, like many of the other prophets, but did not command him to write down his

⁷⁶ See n. 13 above.

⁷⁷ Abarbanel's aim to demonstrate the Torah's absolute, divine perfection is the subject of my forthcoming study "Divine Perfection and Methodological Inconsistency: Towards an Understanding of Isaac Abarbanel's Exegetical Frame of Mind," *JSQ* (in press).

revelation, unlike the rest of the prophets, seems to run counter to the inherent logic of religious thought. It is simply not convincing. Abarbanel himself, as we have seen, did not succeed in formulating a completely coherent solution to this problem, and he seems to have been aware of this difficulty. Nevertheless, we should not expect to find Abarbanel openly acknowledging his failure to produce a perfectly adequate solution to the aforementioned problem. This was not his custom. Not that he was less than honest, but his main concern in his writings was less to arrive at absolute truth than to strengthen the hope and faith of a generation stricken by misfortune and disbelief. Moreover, he did not doubt the truth of his solution and therefore did not think it necessary to call his readers' attention to flaws which, he was convinced, could ultimately be corrected.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Cf. Moshe Tzvi Segal, "R. Isaac Abarbanel as a Biblical Commentator," *Tarbiz* 8 (1937), p. 280 (Heb.): "In Abarbanel there are no 'ifs' or 'maybes.' His interpretations bear no sign of doubt or hesitation. He is convinced of the truth of his words, and all the more so of his own ability to settle all difficulties and solve all problems that may arise with regard to the meaning of Scripture."