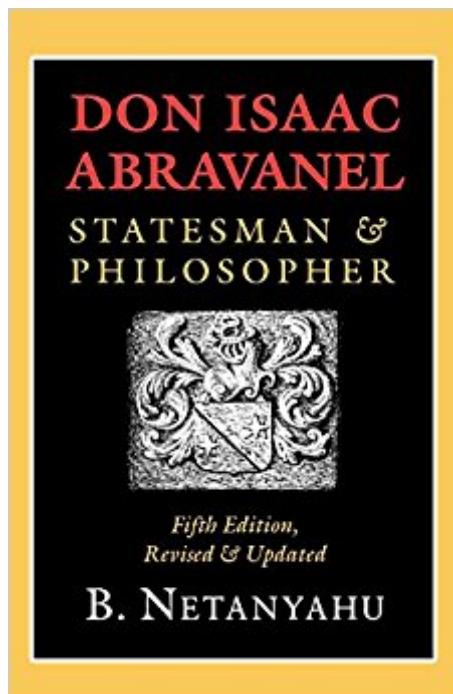


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Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman And Philosopher



Synopsis

Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) was a major historical figure during the waning of the Middle Ages. Statesman, diplomat, courtier, and financier, he was, at the same time, a scholar of encyclopedic learning, a philosopher, an exegete, a prolific author, a mystic, and an apocalyptic. In Abravanel, B. Netanyahu suggests, two long lines of tradition met and concluded: that of medieval Jewish statesmen and that of medieval Jewish philosophers. In what is both a biography and an exploration of Abravanel's thought and influence, Netanyahu describes how Abravanel illuminated the grave crisis and profound transformation experienced by the Jewish people after the Spanish expulsion. First published in 1953, Don Isaac Abravanel has been out of print for several years. This new edition includes revisions in the text, notes, and bibliography.

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Customer Reviews

"This is the study of the life and ideas of Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), a major figure at the end of the Middle Ages and during the transformation of Judaism after the Spanish expulsion. The author traces Abravanel's tumultuous career as a financier and statesman in Portugal, Spain, Naples, and Venice and analyses his world outlook, view of history, political ideas, and mystical messianism." —W. Charles Heiser, S. J., *Theology Digest*, Fall 1999 "A basic reference and one which cannot be ignored by any responsible scholar in the fields of Spanish and Jewish studies. . . . It is one of those rare books which make interesting reading both for scholars and for the general reader interested in Judaism and its rich cultural and religious history." —Francisco

I selected this book because of Netanyahu's relationship with the Israeli politician, and, yes, his scholarly reputation. This book is an amazing story of a Jewish leader in fanatically Christian Spain. It is very well written; never had I read this succinct and entirely believable explanation of why conflicts existed between those who reluctantly embraced the new order and those who chose to adhere to beliefs, traditions, and accepted forms of government and worship. Don Isaac came to life.

An outstanding person who combined his private life with that of his people in a chaotic period. The book presents this person in an objective and respectful manner. In addition this leader wrote commentaries on part of the Old Testament and his thoughts concerning the Jewish fate. Although not all scholars accepted his attitude it is still challenging and interesting

Great Book.

Great book.

This book really is two books in one. The first half is a biography of Abravanel, who was exiled from Portugal to Spain to Italy, and was a financier and adviser to kings in all three places. The second half focuses on Abravanel's Torah scholarship. I learned something from both of them. In the first half, Netanyahu suggests that the oppression of Jews was not solely a matter of clerical fanaticism. The rising middle class saw the Jews as competitors, and the king saw that he could gain their support and get lots of short term wealth by confiscating their property; Netanyahu sees their Christian piety as a scam designed to hide their economic interests. In the second half, Netanyahu discussed Abravanel's philosophy and theology. He suggests that Abravanel was far more important in the centuries after his death than he is today; his willingness to discuss Christian commentators and his detailed rebuttal of Christian faith claims caused him to get lots of attention from Christian commentators (especially Protestants inspired by his interest in messianism). And because Abravanel creatively interpreted the Book of Daniel to suggest that the Messiah was coming soon, he may have inspired Jewish messianists of the 16th and 17th century. On the other hand, Abravanel was not at all a rationalist: he assumed the literal truth of the Hebrew Bible, rather than trying to explain its miracles as natural phenomena. Like the medieval

scholastics, his reasoning was limited by restricted dogma. Thus, he isn't really as influential today. More liberal Jews ignore him because he's not so relevant to a post-Enlightenment world, and haredim prefer Rashi, who was pithier and less interested in philosophy. One other reason Abravenel is less relevant today is that, like medieval Christians, he doesn't really believe in human progress. While some Jews believe the story of history is that of the Ascent of Man, he believes in the Fall of Man- not in one fell swoop (unlike Christian believers in Original Sin) but gradually, as man went from the spirituality of Adam to being "corrupted by the pursuit of the artificial." For example, Abravenel explains the Tower of Babel story as an outgrowth of this: when people used natural things, they had the same name for everything. But the more they invented, more confusion they created as each family gave new objects a different name. Abravenel also wrote about politics; while other Jewish thinkers thought the Torah commanded monarchy, Abravenel viewed the ideal government as a Sanhedrin, a theocratic government of the best (who of course would be clerics as well, since in the Middle Ages the most learned people in arts and sciences were clergy).

Abravenel's hostility to monarchy may have arisen from personal experience; he probably would have been executed by the king of Portugal had he not fled to Spain, and was then exiled by the king of Spain for refusing to convert to Christianity. On the other hand he opposed rebellion against kings, because the first Biblical kings were appointed by prophets and thus ruled by Divine right.

Don Isaac Abravenel lived at the juncture of the Medieval and the Renaissance, and through the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. His writings help preserve the Jews through this troubled time, but also delayed the resettlement of the Land of Israel. Ben-Zion Netanyahu (father of the hero of Entebbe, and of the recent Israeli PM) first tells of the life of Abravenel, and then discusses his outlook and religion. This unusual treatment works very well. Netanyahu first introduces us to the attitudes and assumptions of the people who lived at the time, which are so often very different than our own, and then discusses how Abravenel fit into, or differed from, that zeitgeist. By building step by step -- World Outlook, View of History, Political Concepts, and finally Messianism, the author educates us about Abravenel's world, as well as his beliefs. I was surprised at Abravenel's prediction that the coming of the Messiah would be immediately preceded by a war between Christians and Moslems. The endnotes, bibliography, and index are all very helpful. [This review is based on the original 1953 edition.]

Benzion Netanyahu's brilliant scholarly study of Don Isaac Abravanel will be of interest to any serious student of medieval life during the period of the Spanish Inquisition. This biography of the statesman, philosopher, mystic, writer, and royal financier is painstakingly researched, using an abundance of primary source material. It is an in-depth, masterfully written examination which meticulously scrutinizes and illuminates the life of Abravanel in the royal court and, later, as a Jewish exile in Naples and Vienna, where he solidifies his political and religious world view. Highly recommended as a serious, contemplative work. This is an interesting and enlightening read, particularly for the historian and scholar.

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