

ISAAC ABRAVANEL AND ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS: A DRAMA OF ERRORS

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Aristotle's Politics was almost unknown in medieval Jewish philosophy, which in its political thought was mainly based upon Plato's Republic as transmitted by the Muslim commentators. This is why Abravanel's apparent usage of the Politics in his antimonarchist interpretation of I Samuel, 8 seems to be such a breakthrough in medieval Jewish political philosophy. Such a breakthrough seems conceivable when we take into consideration the influence exerted on Abravanel by scholastic political philosophy, which was heavily influenced by the Politics ever since the text was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century.

However, a close examination of Abravanel's text proves that his knowledge of the text derived from secondary sources, namely, from the interpretation of scholastic commentaries such as those of Aquinas and Paulus Burgos. He himself most probably never read the text itself. Consequently, there is no breakthrough in his usage of Aristotle. Although, apparently, Abravanel was influenced by scholastic philosophy more than any other medieval Jewish philosopher, he, too, just like his many predecessors, carried on the old Platonic-Muslim tradition in his political thought.

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I

It is well known that medieval Jewish political thought is based principally on the Platonic tradition as set forth in *The Republic* and the *Laws*, with modifications of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This was how the tradition passed into medieval thought through the Islamic commentaries, especially of Al Farabi and Ibn Rushd.¹

Aristotle's *Politics*, by contrast, although its existence was known, was not used by Jewish philosophers until the late Middle Ages, and even then only marginally. The omission is especially noticeable considering that in other areas of thought the Aristotelian tradition exerted a marked influence on Jewish philosophy. In political thought this was not the case, nor did the situation change in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the centers of Jewish culture in southern Europe began to be affected by Latin-Christian Scholasticism, in which the *Politics* had been highly influential since its translation into Latin by William of Moerbeke in the thirteenth century.²

The first Jewish scholar who expressly informs us that he had "seen" the Latin version of the *Politics*, Meir Alvadish of Castile in the fourteenth century, purposely refrained from translating it into Hebrew because he feared that his understanding of the text was still inadequate to the task, and he did not yet possess a good commentary to it.³ The first Jewish thinker to directly cite the *Politics*, albeit with much abbreviation, was Joseph Albo in the *Book of Roots*; this was already the first half of the fifteenth century. Still, it is characteristic that a quotation from the *Politics* is given not in reference to Aristotle's political thought per se but to his criticism of the Platonic republic.⁴ Aristotle did not interest the Jewish thinkers as an independent political philosopher so much as a critic of the Platonic system. The Platonic tradition continued to predominate in Jewish political thought until the start of modern times. The inertia of tradition and theological constraints made this almost inevitable. Al Farabi and Ibn Rushd, not Aquinas, the great Christian interpreter of Aristotle, continued to hold sway in Jewish political thought for centuries after it had departed from the area of influence of Islamic culture. The storm whipped up by the

Politics in late medieval political philosophy passed it by almost entirely.

II

Considering this, Isaac Abravanel's massive reliance on the *Politics* in his well known commentary to the "judgment of the King" in I Samuel, 8 constitutes a significant breakthrough in Jewish political thought. However, the question is if indeed there is massive reliance on the *Politics* or if it only seems to be so. This is the question which the present article seeks to answer.

Many years ago Isaac Baer defined Abravanel as "a philosopher who learned the political philosophy of Aristotle." But in the same article, indeed on the same page, Baer states in a footnote that "regarding Aristotle, it is important for our concern to know if [Abravanel] had read the *Politics*." Baer himself leaves the question open. He assumes that Aristotelian political ideas did reach Abravanel, through a secondary source at least, but he is not at all certain if he actually read the *Politics*.⁵ In another article on Abravanel's political theory, published the same year (1937), Leo Strauss adopts essentially the same position. He notes the interesting fact that in his political discourse Abravanel cites the *Metaphysics* on a certain matter, not the parallel passage in the *Politics*. From this Strauss infers that Abravanel possibly knew the *Politics* only at second hand.⁶ Years later Netanyahu, by contrast, stated that not only was Abravanel influenced by Aristotelian political ideas, but that he quoted directly — several times — from the *Politics*. It seems, then, that the question left open by Baer over fifty years ago was resolved once and for all.⁷

The great majority of direct references to the *Politics* are made, as stated, in Abravanel's onslaught against the institution of monarchy in his commentary to I Samuel, 8. Here Abravanel refers eight times to Aristotle and his works, usually the *Politics*. In the standard edition of his *Commentary on the First Prophets* Abravanel mentions Aristotle by name only once. Not by chance, this is the first time he refers to him in the framework of the discussion on monarchy. Moreover, not only does Abravanel name Aristotle, he also indicates the location of the source fairly

exactly: "Aristotle in the third (book) of *The Governance of the State*." He makes the same reference several times subsequently, albeit without mentioning Aristotle by name.⁸ It was common in medieval Hebrew literature to call the *Politics* by this title or a variation of it.⁹ It is no accident that Abravanel here, and later, cites the third book of the *Politics*. In this book Aristotle treats precisely the question that exercises Abravanel, namely, the theory of governments. In the next mention of Aristotle, Abravanel repeats the first reference: "As the investigator indicted in the (above) mentioned place."¹⁰ Thereafter he no longer names Aristotle, but uses the terms "the wise men of ethics," "the investigator," "the investigators," "the wise (one)," "the Divine (one)" and "master of the philosophers." The first three, at least, are accepted forms signifying Aristotle in particular. In most places where they appear the editor of the standard text added Aristotle's name in parentheses for the benefit of the reader.¹¹ In all these cases the allusion is indeed to Aristotle, and usually to the *Politics*. Therefore, Abravanel certainly attributes his ideas to Aristotle. But is the direct source really the third book of the *Politics*? This we still have to check. The issue arises when Abravanel expounds the fifth opinion on the interpretation of the chapter, which he ascribes to the apostate Paul of Burgos, and which distinguishes between positive monarchy and tyranny. In accordance with this view, Samuel's anger was not aroused by the people's wish for a king, for monarchy in itself is positive government, but by their preference for tyranny over the positive kind of monarchy. Here Abravanel cites the position that he ascribes to Aristotle:

The case is not that a king is bad and harmful. In fact, it is suitable and necessary for a people, according to the law of nature. As the investigator said in the (above) mentioned place, an association of people cannot survive unless it has one leader who is in charge of everything, like the heart in the body of an animal, and the Lord blessed be he, in existence in general.¹²

Later on, Abravanel repeats these statements exactly, when he is about to present his own stance on the question:

We ought to know first whether the existence of a king among a people is a necessary thing, required in itself, and without which nothing is possible. Those who have investigated it (Aristotle and his companions), think that this is so, and that the relation of the king to the political association is like the relation of the heart to the body of an animal possessing a heart, and like the relation of what is to the first cause, blessed be he.¹³

Here Abravanel presents Aristotle as favoring the positive kind of absolute monarchy: rule by one man who is righteous, which accords with the order of things in the world and the law of nature. He likewise links this to the organic theory of the state, that is, the analogy between the dominant function of the heart in the living body and the function of the king in the body politic, and with the theological analogy between the special nature of God in the order of creation and the special nature of the king in the order of the state.

In the *Politics* Aristotle does indeed present monarchy as positive government, but only constitutional monarchy, and he expressly dissents from its absolute forms. Nor does he identify even constitutional monarchy as the ideal regime, merely as one of the possible positive governments. The preferred government, in his view, as presented in the *Politics* at least, is actually the *politeia*, for it is a kind of moderate and balanced democracy. Nor do the analogies — organic and theological — attributed to Aristotle by Abravanel appear in the third book, or anywhere else in the *Politics*. By their very nature these analogies support absolute monarchy, and do not fit the Aristotelian position at all.

By contrast, in the *Ethics* (8:10-11) Aristotle still puts forward a theory of governments that follows the Platonic system (the *Republic*, 8-9). There the rule of the individual, concerned for the benefit of the subjects — that is, monarchy of the positive sort — is set forth as a kind of ideal government. Its opposite is tyranny, characterized by concern for the benefit of the ruler, and this is presented as the most negative form of rule. In this respect Abravanel perhaps adheres to the tried and tested *Ethics*, which he undoubtedly knew, when he distinguishes between positive monarchy and government by tyranny. Possibly following Paul of Burgos, he mistakenly relates this opinion to the *Politics*, and

combines it with clearly Scholastic arguments, such as the justification of monarchy by natural law (*lex natura*) and the organic and theological analogies. Neither of these is found in the *Ethics* either. All we can find there is a hint at an analogy between the good single ruler and the shepherd (8:11).

These analogies were usual in medieval political thought, both Muslim and Christian, as were other similar analogies such as the king as a shepherd, the sun among the stars, etc. Accordingly they appeared in Jewish thought also.¹⁴ Al Farabi presents a detailed organic theory at the beginning of the political chapters of *The Perfect State*, whose high point is the analogy between the leading role of the heart in the living body and the absolute status of the philosopher-king in the body politic.¹⁵ Walzer assumes that the source of this analogy is late Greek literature, neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic, which supported monarchical government,¹⁶ but it is certainly not in the *Politics*. The same idea exactly is repeated in Aquinas' *De Regimine Principum* (On Princely Government).¹⁷ Aquinas, and Dante in *De Monarchia* (On Monarchy), also apply the analogy between the king and God extensively.¹⁸ Both also ascribe these analogies to Aristotle himself. Aquinas states that Aristotle set out the theological analogy in the *Metaphysics*, and Dante attributes the theory that rule by the individual accords with the natural order, to Aristotle's *Politics*, "*venerabilis eius autoritas*" ("with his venerable authority"). Here Dante bases himself on Aristotle's distinction between rulers and ruled in nature, which appears in the context of the discourse on slavery.¹⁹

Aquinas and Dante, who favored absolute monarchy, and following them also Abravanel, who rejected monarchy altogether, ascribe to Aristotle of the *Politics* a position that was in no way acceptable to him. But while Aquinas and Dante claimed that their views matched Aristotle's, Abravanel, who contrary to them presented an anti-monarchical posture, was obliged to show Aristotle's position as contrary to his own. However, as we shall see, even in this he based himself on Aristotle. It seems that the authority of Aristotle was so great — in the days of Aquinas and Dante, as in the days of Abravanel, who was active about 150 years after them — that they preferred to impose on him theories that he by no means accepted. Indeed, it is doubtful

that Dante knew the *Politics* as a primary source either, despite his abundant quotation from it.²⁰

Abravanel, then (mistakenly) attributes to Aristotle of the *Politics* support for monarchy, and absolute monarchy at that, as the preferable and necessary form of government. As stated, this was not Aristotle's genuine opinion at all, at least not in the *Politics*. Abravanel argues, with a wealth of reasons that are not our concern here, that the stand he mistakenly ascribes to Aristotle is incorrect. Monarchy, he asserts, is not a necessary existence, but a negative regime which by its nature must inevitably deteriorate into tyranny. Abravanel prefers the mixed government of the kind of the Venetian Republic.²¹ Had he learned Aristotle's true opinion he would have realized that it was by no means remote from his own. Here perhaps lies the greatest irony in this drama of errors.

It is clear that Abravanel adopted these ideas from other sources, and of all those possible Aquinas seems the most likely. The position he ascribed expressly and directly to Aristotle is that the rule of a king "is suitable and necessary for a people, according to the law of nature. And as the investigator said in the (above) mentioned place, an association of people cannot survive unless it has one leader who is in charge of everything, the heart in the body of an animal, and the Lord, blessed be he, in existence in general."²² In Aquinas the perfect parallel to this statement is found, regarding his fundamental position, which considered monarchy the ideal government and in harmony with the natural order, and in his use of the organic and theological analogies:

*ea, quae sunt ad naturam, optime se habent: in singulis enim operatur natura, quod optimum est; omne autem naturale regimen ab uno est. In membrorum enim multitudine unum est quod omnia movet, scilicet cor; et in partibus animae una vis principaliter praesidet, scilicet ratio. Est etiam apibus unus rex, et in toto universo unus Deus factor omnium et rector.*²³

More examples are found further on, leading to the same conclusion. Indeed, there was an evident tendency among medieval Christian commentators on the *Politics* to interpret the text so as to emphasize monarchical government, and among the

various governments that Aristotle described all preferred monarchy and depicted it as the ideal.²⁴ It was from them that Abravanel got the idea that Aristotle favored monarchical government. Abravanel himself rejected monarchy in principle, and therefore also the organic and theological analogies. His complementary argument was that even if monarchy was a necessary existence in principle, it would not apply to the Jewish people. The king in general had defined functions, and these were not relevant to the special circumstances of the existence of the Jewish people. In listing the functions of monarchy in general, Abravanel again resorts to Aristotle's *Politics*:

A people can need a king for three matters. First, for military purposes, to rescue the people from their enemies and fight for their land. The second matter, to decree nomoses and establish laws that are needed for the perfection of the political association, and as is explained in the third (book) of *The Governance of the State* (the *Politics*). And the third matter is to (be able to) hit and punish at times not in accordance with the laws, as the circumstances decree, which is suitable to (the king's) absolute power.²⁵

It is not quite clear if Abravanel ascribes the first two matters to Aristotle — perhaps only the second. In any event, Aristotle's discussion of monarchy in the third book of the *Politics* certainly does treat these two functions of the king.²⁶ But this discourse on the functions of the king is actually more prominent in the neo-Platonic theories of the functions of the philosopher-king, which were so widespread in the Muslim and Jewish literature of the Middle Ages, and they are also clearly expressed in the political thought of Abravanel himself.²⁷ The third matter concerns the "absolute potential" (*plenitudo potestatis* or *rex absolutus legibus*, as is common in medieval Latin literature), which, in this view, the king has the right to activate depending on the needs of the hour. The distinction between limited or constitutional monarchy (*rex cum potestae limitatae*) and absolute monarchy actually appears in the third book of the *Politics*, but here Abravanel does not ascribe it to Aristotle. It probably reached him through his study of the writings of the apostate Paul of Burgos, who bases

his commentary to I Samuel, 8 on this distinction, and Abravanel expressly cites this source.²⁸

The next group of cases in which Abravanel cites Aristotle directly concern the well-known distinction between positive monarchy and negative monarchy, that is, tyranny:

A. This is why He ordered him, blessed be he, to tell the people the Judgment of the King, which is the judgment that a king who does not abide by any law can do. This is what Aristotle called in the third (book) of *The Governance of the State* (= *Politics*) a wicked and despotic king, which is called *Tirano* in their language. This means that he exploits and takes and confiscates things for himself. As for the virtuous king, however, the (above) mentioned judgment is not suitable nor is it related to him.

B. And the investigator (= Aristotle) in *The Governance of the State* (= *Politics*), said that there are two (kinds of) leaders, a virtuous one or a wicked and despotic one. And the virtuous one is defined as he who rules according to the will of those whom he leads and in accordance with the law. And the wicked despot is no other than he who leads them by force and according to his wishes.²⁹

In another instance, which appears in the questions preceding the discourse on this subject, Abravanel presents exactly the same distinction, but this is the only time he does not attribute it directly to Aristotle: "And the wise men of ethics have already written that a king who plunders is no king but an exploiter, called *Tirano* in their language."³⁰

Netanyahu took this as decisive proof for the claim that Abravanel indeed quoted directly from the *Politics*, and it therefore settled Baer's uncertainty once and for all.³¹ True, the discussion on government by tyranny appears explicitly in the third book of the *Politics*. Aristotle displays tyranny as one of the possible negative forms of monarchy.³² But in the *Politics* the distinction between the king and the tyrant does not constitute the focus of the treatise, as Abravanel presents it. The exposition of the cases as an antithesis is in fact found in the *Ethics*, as noted, and it is especially highlighted in Aquinas, he himself having been influenced by Aristotle. Again, Abravanel seems to follow

Aquinas, who re-emphasizes the stark contrast between king and tyrant. While in the *Politics* Aristotle sets forth different forms of monarchical rule — positive and negative, Aquinas, and following him Abravanel, only presents these two opposing possibilities. As in the *Ethics*, Aquinas' condensed description of the features of the tyrant parallels that of Abravanel exactly:

Si igitur regimen iniustum per unum tantum fiat, qui sua commoda ex regimine quaerat, non autem bonum multi-tudinis sibi subiectae, talis rector tyrannus vocatur, nomine a fortitudine derivato, quia scilicet per potentiam opprimit, non per iustitiam regit: unde et apud antiquos potentes quique tyranni vocabantur.

This sort of contrast between king and tyrant is customary in medieval thought, and it also to be found in Abravanel's Florentine contemporaries, the Jew Yohanan Alemanno and Machiavelli.³³

The height of absurdity and inconsistency in Abravanel's resort to the Aristotelian source is found in his arguments against monarchy. On the one hand, Abravanel claims (wrongly) that Aristotle favored absolute monarchical rule, and on the other he makes use of the writings of the same Aristotle to reject monarchy and to prove not only that it is not necessary from the viewpoint of the natural order, but that it is bound to sink into tyranny.

Abravanel offers three main arguments against monarchy. The first is that the rule of a monarch is more likely to stray and deteriorate than the rule of many, who complement and balance each other. The second is that in such matters the age-old lesson of history is preferable to logical deduction, and experience teaches that monarchy in fact always declines into tyranny, while the rule of many, by contrast, protects stability and social order. The third is that the analogy between natural order and Divine rule over the world and the need for monarchical rule is essentially inapplicable.

The absurdity is that in all of these arguments Abravanel gives Aristotle's position as proof. That is, he introduces Aristotle as an expression of the monarchical position and also as an expression of the rejection of that very position: he calls on Aristotle to give evidence against himself. Furthermore, when

he presented Aristotle as a supporter of monarchical government, Abravanel laid claim to citing the third book of the *Politics*. By contrast, in each of the other three anti-monarchical arguments he bases himself on other writings of Aristotle. In only one case does he refer to the exact source, and that is "the beginning of what comes after *Physics*," namely the *Metaphysics*. In the other two cases Abravanel does not clarify his Aristotelian source, but it is certain that he does not have the *Politics* in mind. One of the two is in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the other is apparently in one of Aristotle's biological writings.

Regarding the first argument, that the considered opinion of the many is preferable to that of the individual, Abravanel refers to the opening of the second book of the *Metaphysics*:

The divine one (Aristotle) says in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that the truth is easy when considered in relation to the knowledge that many men have and the attainment thereof by all of them together, but very hard for the individual by himself. This shows that ignorance is more apt to be found in an individual, while understanding together with the comprehension of the truth are more apt to be found among the many. With the power of those who understand being limited, they will not expose themselves by doing what is not proper.³⁴

This reference, it is recalled, is what made Strauss think that Abravanel had perhaps not read the *Politics* at all, because he preferred to cite the *Metaphysics* rather than the identical passage as it appears in the third book of the *Politics*.³⁵ It seems that Strauss' intuition was sound.

As for the second argument, that experience is preferable to deduction, Abravanel cites from the *Ethics*, Book I, chapter 3, in which Aristotle states, in obvious criticism of the Platonic system, that in human affairs it is impossible to rely on mathematical deduction: "What reasonable arguments do we have to bring to bear upon this point? The wise one (Aristotle) has already taught us that experience prevails over the syllogism."³⁶ Aquinas too accepted the Aristotelian position. But while he argued on this basis that historical experience actually proves the preferability of monarchy, Abravanel argues, on the same method-

ological grounds, the opposite, that experience proves that republican government of the Venetian type is best.³⁷ Each of them learns from the historical experience of his own age, and each of those ages teaches a different lesson.

Abravanel's third argument, as noted, is that the analogy between the absolute rule of God in the natural order and the absolute rule of the king in the state arises from an error in logic. He dismisses the theological analogy out of hand, with the manifestly Maimonidean argument that it is impossible to draw an inference from God, who is a necessary existence, for human beings, who are only a possible existence. It is a matter of two absolutely different entities. The fact that Abravanel develops the argument in detail here is also evidence that he is not really debating the point with Aristotle, who never used the theological analogy, but with Aquinas and his like, who used it often, as stated.³⁸

Concerning the organic analogy, equating the leading function of the heart in the living body to the functions of the king in the body politic, Abravanel states that Aristotle also agreed that the organs do not receive instructions from a single ruling organ but operate collectively:

The wise men of medicine already said that the animal body has three major organs leading it. It was also the opinion of the master of philosophers (Aristotle), who said that the heart alone is the major (organ). This, however, relates to the descent of the spirit and does not contradict (the fact that) the brain is in charge of leading the body by the potential of the soul, while the liver leads the natural (potential).³⁹

The conclusion, then, is that Abravanel relies on clearly Aristotelian arguments — which do not appear in the *Politics* — to reject monarchical government. But when he uses instances seemingly taken from the third book to demonstrate the monarchical position, he attaches Aristotle's name and the *Politics* to postures that are not Aristotelian at all but conform to Aquinas; or he makes statements that may indeed be found in the third book but are far more prominent in Aquinas and his like; or he actually bases himself on the *Ethics* and not on the *Politics*. Abravanel's arguments against the theological analogy decid-

edly do not constitute a debate with Aristotle, but with Aquinas. So does his commentary to the words of King Solomon in Proverbs, which Aquinas sees as support for monarchical government. There Abravanel states that "there is no reason to argue from what Solomon said...", clearly in direct response to Aquinas' argument.⁴⁰

It is entirely reasonable to assume that Abravanel in fact resorts to Aquinas, even when he professes to quote from the *Politics* directly. On several matters we have found a conceptual, and even a textual link between him and Aquinas. We know that Abravanel held Aquinas in great esteem and cited him specifically in other places. In *Mifalot Elohim* he states that "Thomas is one of the gentile wise men and he is greater than the greatest among them." Furthermore, in the commentary to I Samuel itself, on chapter 28, which tells the story of Saul and the Witch of Endor, Abravanel relies on what Aquinas wrote on the nature of spirits, and he refers to it precisely: "And the wise man Thomas discussed it in his book called *Secunda Secundae*, the third introduction."⁴¹ Here Abravanel cites the third part of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, various parts of which contain a detailed discussion of political questions, under evident Aristotelian influence. In this part of the *Summa* Aquinas also returns to the problem of tyranny, exactly in the same spirit we have noted in Abravanel, and he cites the third book of the *Politics*, which Abravanel claims to quote. Perhaps this is where Abravanel took his reference. Here also Aquinas presents his view concerning the right to oppose tyrannical rule; Abravanel expresses a similar position, negating opposition to any government, even tyranny.⁴² If Abravanel quotes Aquinas directly in the commentary to I Samuel, 28, it is highly likely that he was familiar with his writings a short time earlier, when he wrote the commentary to I Samuel, 8 of the same book. Indeed, at the beginning of the commentary to chapter 8 he specifically notes that he takes as his ground, among other things, the views of "Christian scholars, new and old."⁴³

In this connection it is interesting to note a remarkable thing. When Abravanel (apparently) cites Aristotle of the *Politics* as favoring monarchical government, he always applies a neutral term: "the investigator." But when he presents Aristotle of the *Metaphysics* and the *Ethics* as proof for arguments negating

monarchy, he showers him with superlatives: "the Divine one," "the wise one," "the master of philosophers." It is obvious which "Aristotle" Abravanel prefers.

Netanyahu's decisive conclusion, that it was proven beyond all doubt that Abravanel quoted from the *Politics* directly, was therefore hasty. Baer's uncertainty remains, and Strauss' intuitive remark is indeed apt. Wherever Abravanel lays claim to quoting directly from the third book of the *Politics*, either it is obvious that this was not the real source at all, or these ideas can easily be found more clearly formulated elsewhere. Added to this, Abravanel cites other works of Aristotle even when he could have found parallels in the *Politics* without trouble.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that Abravanel did not read the *Politics*. He had some information — inexact and fragmented — from the *Ethics*, which he knew, and from some intermediary sources, probably the writings of Aquinas, Paul of Burgos, etc. He attributes to Aristotle opinions that completely distort the actual position of "the master of philosophers"; he could have gained access to ideas that are genuinely Aristotelian in other ways;⁴⁴ and he has no argument whatever with Aristotle, only with Aquinas and his like. On the other hand, Abravanel, as was commonly the case, was very familiar with "what Plato said in the book on *The Governance of the State* (= *Politics*)" in his Averroist commentary, and Platonic political thought, including the philosopher-king theory, had important influence on various aspects of his political philosophy.⁴⁵

III

The remaining question is why Abravanel cited the *Politics* when he apparently had no immediate familiarity with the text. It cannot be argued that he did so to avoid direct confrontation with Christian philosophers, pretending to base himself on Aristotle and not on them. There was no reason for this, and it was common practice among Jewish thinkers of his day in Spain and Italy to dispute the Christian philosophers. We have observed how he presents the views of the apostate Paul of Burgos, and at the beginning of his commentary to I Samuel, 8 he states explicitly that among others he also refers to the opinions of

"Christian scholars, new and old." We know that in his commentary on the Bible he unhesitatingly cited Christian philosophers such as Augustine, Albertus Magnus, Nicolas da Lira, as well as Aquinas himself, and at times he actually preferred their interpretations to the views of the Jewish sages.⁴⁶

It seems that Abravanel arrived at his ideas from a study of the writings of Christian philosophers such as Paul of Burgos, Aquinas, etc. The latter had read the *Politics* and were influenced by Aristotelian ideas, yet they did not accept them as they were, but elaborated them to suit their purposes. Abravanel, however, took them for original Aristotelian concepts and allowed himself the liberty of ascribing them to Aristotle directly. The ethic of precise identification of sources was not yet as developed then as it is supposed to be today. He might even have believed, against the background of the return to Classical culture with the Renaissance, that it was more fitting to profess citation of the classical source itself than some medieval commentators and elaborators. What is more, the *Politics* was highly revered in the general culture of the times — Scholastic as well as Renaissance. His contemporary, the Florentine Jew Yohanan Alemanno, behaved similarly when out of humanist pretensions he claimed to base himself on Plato's *Republic*; in fact he was sticking to the medieval course, still quoting from the Averroist commentary in its Hebrew translation.⁴⁷

It seems, then, that in the end there was no significant breakthrough in Abravanel's treatment of Aristotle's *Politics*. Even he, perhaps influenced more than any other Jewish philosopher by Scholastic political thought, did not read the Aristotelian text and was not influenced by it directly. As usual in the Jewish political philosophical tradition, he too continued in essence to tread the well-worn path of the Platonic tradition through the agency of Islam.⁴⁸

Notes

1. Regarding the Platonic tradition, see this author's soon to be published, with extensive bibliography: A. Melamed, *The Philosopher-King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Philosophy* (Brown Judaic Studies).
2. On how far the *Politics* was known in Islamic thought, see: S. Pines, "Aristotle's Politics in Arabic Philosophy," *I.O.S.*, 5 (1975):150-160; the article is reprinted in S. Pines, *The Collected Works*, vol. II (Leiden, 1989), pp. 146-156. On the influence of the *Politics* on Scholastic political thought, see G.H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, 1961), ch. 13; M. Dorman, *Marsilius of Padua* (Ramat Gan, 1972) (Hebrew), *passim*; Aristotle, the *Politics*, translated with an introduction by T.A. Sinclair (Penguin, 1965), The Introduction; W. Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Penguin, 1965), ch. 6; C. Martin, "Some Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Politics," *History*, 36 (1951):29-44; J. Dunabin, "The Reception and Interpretation of Aristotle's Politics" in N. Kretzmann *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 723-737.
 On how far the *Politics* influenced Jewish political philosophy in the Middle Ages in general, see this author's "Aristotle's Politics in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought," *Pe'amim*, 51 (1992):27-69 (Hebrew). For a Hebrew version of this article, see *Da'at*, 29 (1992):69-81.
3. L.V. Berman, "The Hebrew Translation from the Latin of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics," in M. Idel, Z. Harvey and A. Schweid, eds., *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Shlomo Pines*, vol. I (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 147-168 (Hebrew); and see this author's "Aristotle's Politics," *ibid.*
4. *Book of Roots*, I, p. 7; and see this author's "Aristotle's Politics," *ibid.*
5. I. Baer, "Don Isaac Abravanel's Attitude towards the Problems of History and State," *Tarbiz*, 8 (1937), p. 245 and n. 11 (Hebrew). In Guttmann there is no reference to the *Politics* in the list of Abravanel's sources; see I. Guttmann, *Die Religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaac Abravanel* (Breslau, 1916), p. 41.
6. L. Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in Trend and Loewe, eds., *Isaac Abravanel, Six Lectures* (Cambridge 1937), p. 113, n. 2. Many studies were published on Abravanel that year, to mark the 500th anniversary

- of his birth; and see the articles by Urbach and Segal (n. 21 below).
7. B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 176, 309, n. 93, 310, 312; and E. Shmueli, *Don Isaac Abravanel and the Expulsion from Spain* (Jerusalem 1963), p. 187 (Hebrew). Shmueli accepts Abravanel's citation of the third book of the *Politics* as it stands. See also recently H. Tirosh-Rothschild, "Political Philosophy in the Writings of Abraham Shalom," in M. Idel, Z. Harvey and A. Schweid, eds., *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Shlomo Pines*, vol. II (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 417, n. 37 (Hebrew). The author still assumes that Abravanel was influenced "by Aristotle's discussion in the *Politics*," basing herself on Baer and others.
 8. *Commentary on the First Prophets* (Jerusalem, 1986), p. 204. Other mentions are on p. 205: "The investigator said in *The Governance of the State*"; p. 204: "As indicated in the third (book) of *The Governance of the State*." On the other hand, in the commentary on Genesis 10 Abravanel uses the expression "the Philosopher in his book on *The Governance of the State*" in the obvious context of Plato's *Republic*, *Commentary on Genesis* (Warsaw 1864); facsimile (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 171. The phrase "governance of the state" is in itself a general term, referring to political philosophy in the broad sense and therefore it is always necessary to check the context for the philosopher — Aristotle or Plato — who is cited. There is a partial English translation of the text, by R. Sacks: see R. Lerner and M. Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Source Book* (New York, 1967), pp. 265-270. I quote from the English translation when available. Other translated passages are this author's own.
 9. See this author's "Aristotle's *Politics*," *op. cit.*
 10. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 204.
 11. "The wise men of ethics," *ibid.*, p. 200; "the investigator," *ibid.*, p. 204; again, "the investigator," *ibid.*, p. 205; "the investigators," *ibid.*; "the wise one," *ibid.*, p. 206; "the Divine one," *ibid.*; "master of the philosophers," *ibid.*
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 205, English translation, p. 265. Smoler and Auerbach state that Abravanel differed from his medieval predecessors and his immediate successors "in opposing the Aristotelian premise that monarchy is indispensable." See *idem.*, "Monarchy in Abravanel's Worldview," *Hagut Ivrit be-Amerika*, vol. II (Tel Aviv, 1973), p. 151 (Hebrew). They too accept at face value Abravanel's claim that he bases himself on the *Politics*, and so are

- incorrect when they take the argument that monarchy is indispensable to be an "Aristotelian premise." Conversely, see correct views on Abravanel's reservations over the Aristotelian position in D. Polish, "Some Medieval Thinkers on the Jewish King," *Judaism*, 29 (1971):326. On the other hand, in his latest article on the subject Polish considers that Abravanel did cite Aristotle, who held a monarchical world outlook. See *idem.*, "Rabbinic Views on Kingship: A Study in Jewish Sovereignty," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 3 (1991):85.
14. A. Melamed, "The Dignity of Man in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought in Spain and Italy," *Italia*, 3 (1982):40 (Hebrew); *idem.* "The Political Discussion in Anatoli's *Mamad ha-Talmidim*," *Da'at*, 20 (1988):107-109 (Hebrew).
 15. R. Walzer, Introduction, translation and commentary, *Al Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 15, 4-6; Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113 and n. 4; A. Ravitzky, "King and Laws in Medieval Thought (Nissim of Gerona vs. Isaac Abravanel)," in R. Bonfil *et al.*, eds., *Tarbut ve-Hevrah be-Toledot Israel bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 478, n. 2 (Hebrew). For the English version, see in L. Landman, ed., *Scholars and Scholarship* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990).
 16. *The Perfect State*, *op. cit.*, p. 435; and N.H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1955).
 17. Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I, chs. 1, 2, 12, in Aquinas, *Selected Political Writings*, edited and introduction by A.P. d'Entreves, translated by J. G. Dawson (Oxford, 1970), pp. 5-7, 11-13, 66-67.
 18. *Ibid.* I, chs. 1, 2, 9, 12, 13, pp. 2-3, 12-13, 50-51, 66-67, 68-71; and also *Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae*, Qu. 103, Art. 3, d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107. Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, a cura di P.G. Ricci (Mondadori, 1965), I, pp. 3, 8-9. And see Strauss, *op. cit.*; Ravitzky, *op. cit.*, p. 478.
 19. The *Politics* I, chs. 3 and 5, and also the *Ethics*, VIII, ch. 11. On Dante see n. 18 above, and also Dorman, *op. cit.*, ch. 4. On Aquinas see n. 23 below.
 20. A.P. d'Entreves, *Dante as a Political Thinker* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 16, 35-36. 1. See Baer, Strauss, Netanyahu, Shmueli, Smoler and Auerbach, Polish and Ravitzky (nn. 5, 6, 7, 13, 15 above), and also E.E. Urbach, "Die Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abrabanel," *M.G.W.J.*, 81 (1937), pp. 257-270. A. Melamed, "The Myth of Venice in Italian Renaissance Jewish Thought," *Italia Judaica*, I (Roma, 1983), pp. 401-413.

21. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 204. Also p. 205, see n. 50 below. On the term "natural law" see A. Melamed, "Natural Law in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought," *Da'at*, 17 (1986):49-66 (Hebrew).
22. *De Regimine Principum*, I, ch. 2, pp. 11-13. See also Ravitzky, *op. cit.*, pp. 478-479.
23. Dorman, *op. cit.*, p. 179, n. 29; Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
24. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 206.
25. *The Politics*, III, chs. 14-15.
26. See, e.g., the discussion of the kingly virtues of Moses, *Commentary on Exodus*, ch. 19, of the kingly virtues of Solomon, *Commentary on I Kings*, ch. 3, and of the kingly virtues of David, *Commentary on I Samuel*, chs. 9, 16 and *Commentary on II Samuel*, ch. 22. For a comprehensive discussion of the subject see this author's book, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; and see n. 45 below.
27. *Commentary on I Kings*, p. 204.
28. The first citation, *ibid.*, p. 204; the second citation, *ibid.*, p. 205. See also Polish, *op. cit.*, p. 329.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
30. Netanyahu, *op. cit.*, p. 176; and p. 310, n. 112.
31. *The Politics*, III, chs. 4, 7-8, 16-17.
32. *De Regimine Principum*, *ibid.*, I, chs. 1, 6-7. Alemanno, *Hai ha-Olamim*, ms. Mantua, 801, fols. 348-352. Machiavelli, *Discourse*, I, ch. 10. See *in extenso* A. Melamed, "Wisdom's Little Sister": The Political Thought of Jewish Thinkers in the Italian Renaissance (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1976), vol. II, ch. 2 (Hebrew); and this author's book, *op. cit.*, chs. 7, 8.
33. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 206; English translation, p. 266; the source, *The Metaphysics*, II, i, p. 993b.
34. The parallel passages in the *Politics*, II, chs. 16, 7, 14. Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 113 and n. 22; Urbach, *op. cit.*, p. 260. Also Netanyahu, *op. cit.*, pp. 174, and 93, n. 309.
35. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 206; English translation, p. 266. Aristotle repeats this view in I, ch. 7.
36. *De Regimine Principum*, I, pp. 2, 10-13.
37. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 206; Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Ravitzky, *op. cit.* The only place where Aristotle comes close to a direct use of the theological analogy is in the *Metaphysics*, XII, p. 10 (1076a), but here too he only quotes from the *Iliad*, II, 204. But Aquinas pounced on this discovery to portray Aristotle as favoring monarchical government. He of course completely ignores the

non-Aristotelian source of the quotation: "*Relinquitur ergo quod gubernatio mundi, quae est optima, sit ab uno gubernante. Et hoc est quod Philosophus dicit in XII Metaphys.: Entia nolunt disponi male, neo bonum pluralitas principatuum; unis ergo Princeps.*" *Summa Theologia, Secunda Secundae*, Qu. 103, Art. 3, d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107. Abravanel, then, had a good master in ascribing to Aristotle monarchial positions that were in no way Aristotelian originally. And see Ibn Pakuda's commentary, n. 40 below.

38. *Commentary to the First Prophets*. Strauss, *op. cit.*; Ravitzky, *op. cit.* This statement, for instance, sounds like a direct response to what Aquinas had said: "*In memborum enim multitudine unum est quod omnia movet, scilicet cor; et in partibus animae una vis principaliter praesidet, scilicet ratio.*" *De Regimine Principum*, I, ch. 1, d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.
39. *Commentary to the First Prophets, ibid. De Regimine Principum*, I, i, d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5, 8-9, 18-19. Ravitzky, *op. cit.*, 479. Contrary to the words of Abravanel, see the position of Ibn Pakuda, who made full use of the analogy between God's rule over the world and the king's rule over the state. Of interest for us here is that Ibn Pakuda presents this as Aristotle's view, as it appears in the *Metaphysics* (n. 37 above) and of course in the *Politics*: "In the signs of God's management of His creation we see that rule can neither succeed nor be constant unless it lies in the hand of one who alone holds the governance in word and action, like a king in his kingdom, like the soul in the body. Aristotle had said in his discussion of unity that a plurality of rulers is not good — the real head is but one. The scriptures also say (Prov. 28:2): For the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof." *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, translated from the original Arabic version, with an introduction and notes by N. Mansoor (London, 1973), p. 127. On the commentaries to these words of Solomon by Ibn Ezra, Albo, Abravanel, and others, see A. Melamed, "The Political Discussion in *Malmed ha-Talmidim*, *op. cit.*, p. 110, n. 60, and *idem*. "Jethro's Advice in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish and Christian Political Thought," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 2 (1990):30-31, n. 8.
40. *Mifalot Elohim* (Lemburg, 1863; reprinted Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 46, 71. *Commentary on the First Prophets*, p. 287. Also Guttman, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
41. *Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae*, Qu. 42, Art. 2. d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161. On this matter see also Melamed, "The Political Discussion," *op. cit.* Abravanel's position on the classification of the laws and the use of the term "natural law" was perhaps also influenced by Aquinas' discourse here, *ibid.*, Qu.

- 57, Art. 2. d'Entreves, pp. 162-165. See also Melamed, "Natural Law," pp. 57-61.
42. *Commentary to the First Prophets*, p. 203.
 43. It was also possible to reach Aristotelian political ideas through the Hebrew translation of the Averroist commentary to the *Rhetoric*, *Sefer ha-Halaza*, ed. Y. Goldenthal (Leipzig, 1842). Indeed, in the *Commentary on II Samuel*, p. 7, dealing with Ahitofel, Abravanel cites this source directly, *ibid.*, p. 367. Cf. Goldenthal edition, pp. 23-24. And also Judah Messer Leon, *The Book of the Honeycomb Flow (Sefer Nofet Zufim)*, a critical edition and translation by I. Rabinowitz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), I, 3, pp. 42-43.
 44. Guttmann, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Netanyahu, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-302, 305, 308, 313. A. Melamed, "Philosophical Commentaries on Jeremiah 9, 22-23 in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 4 (1985):63-73 (Hebrew). See also this author's book, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; and n. 27 above.
 45. Guttmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46. I. Segal, "Isaac Abravanel as a Commentator on the Bible," *Tarbiz*, 8 (1938):261-299 (Hebrew). Also A. Melamed, "The Perception of Jewish History in Italian Jewish Thought of the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Italia Judaica*, II (Roma, 1986), pp. 139-170.
 46. A. Melamed, "The Hebrew Laudatio of Yohanan Alemanno: In Praise of Lorenzo II Magnifico and the Florentine Constitution," in H. Beinart, ed., *Jews in Italy, Studies Dedicated to the Memory of U. Cassuto* (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 12-16.
 47. In this respect I do not accept the claims of Lerner and Mahdi that two currents may be identified in Jewish political thought, one influenced by the Platonic tradition through Islamic mediation, the other influenced by the Latin-Christian tradition. See Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy*, pp. 16-17. The almost complete absence of Aristotle's *Politics* from Jewish political thought, including that which developed in the Christian lands in the late Middle Ages, manifestly proves that there was but a single current — the Platonic, through Islamic mediation. This current continued to dominate right up to the beginning of modern times. To it were appended no more than very marginal influences from Latin Christian political thought. These certainly did not merge to form a significant and independent stream. The case of Abravanel is simply a central and representative example. See this author's "Aristotle's *Politics*," *op. cit.* Nevertheless, the influence of Scholastic political philosophy on Jewish thought in the late Middle Ages merits special study.