

**“Reflections on Leadership in Isaac Abravanel’s  
Commentary on the Blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:1–28)”**

**Marianne Luijken Gevirtz**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for Ordination  
Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion  
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**Referee: Dr. Alan Cooper**

## **DIGEST**

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The 15th century biblical commentator, theologian and philosopher Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) has been the subject of many biographical studies. While he displayed great erudition in his philosophical works, most scholars agree that his originality of thought is found in the many biblical commentaries he wrote. He is often considered the last of the great medieval Jewish Bible commentators. Dominant themes in Abravanel’s writings were his political theories, his concept of history, the nature of prophecy, and the coming of the Messiah. He often expressed his opposition to what he considered extremes of rationalism, as represented in particular by Gersonides. Abravanel was heavily influenced by a number of earlier exegetes, both Jewish and Christian, of whom, in addition to Gersonides, Isaac Arama and Nicholas de Lyra stand out as major contributors to Abravanel’s exegetical work.

Abravanel’s commentaries on the first four books of the Pentateuch

were finished late in his life, after he moved to Venice in 1503. According to his recent biographer B. Netanyahu, it was in these commentaries that Abravanel expressed his mature views on history, philosophy and government. Abravanel himself wrote: :“I invested in it all my thought and all my knowledge.” In spite of this, there is surprisingly little scholarship devoted to Abravanel's Bible exegesis, and this is especially the case with his commentaries on the first four books of the Pentateuch. There seems to be a renewed interest in Abravanel as exegete, judging from some recent studies published by scholars in Spain, France and Germany.

The purpose of this thesis is to add to the growing number of studies on Abravanel's Bible exegesis by translating and analyzing one of the chapters of his Commentary on Genesis. Abravanel's practice of dividing the Torah into his own chapters, preceded by an introduction and his formulation of the main exegetical problems in the text, indicates that he considered Genesis 49 to be a an exegetical unit by itself.

## CONTENTS

Chapter One:	The Biblical Exegesis of Isaac Abravanel	1
Chapter Two:	Abravanel's Commentary on Genesis 49:1-28	11
Chapter Three:	Abravanel's Views on Kingship and Political Leadership	64
Chapter Four:	The Leadership Theme in Abravanel's Commentary on the Blessing of Jacob	75

## Chapter One: The Biblical Exegesis of Abravanel

Don Isaac ben Yehuda Abravanel (1437–1508) was of Spanish origin, but long before his birth his family had left Spain for Portugal, where it became closely connected with the aristocracy and the royal Court. He himself served as the treasurer of King Alfonso V of Portugal.

When he was still a very young man Abravanel wrote one of his first major works, Crown of the Elders (*Ateret Zeqenim*), a philosophical treatise in which he contrasted the truth of prophetic teaching with the inadequacy of the speculation of the philosophers who “walk in darkness.”<sup>1</sup> The writing of this treatise drew him to biblical exegesis, especially to that of the books of the prophets. To elucidate the biblical text would become his lifelong ambition, and in the course of his lifetime he would write commentaries on the entire Hebrew Bible with the exception of the Writings of which he dealt with the book of Daniel only.<sup>2</sup> And it was in Lisbon, when he was twenty years old, that he started to write his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>3</sup>

Under Alfonso's successor, Joao II, Abravanel was accused of treason and was forced to flee the country. While living in exile in Castile, he

<sup>1</sup> B. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel. Statesman & Philosopher. (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1968): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17 and notes 43 and 46.

devoted himself to religious study, convinced that his misfortune was the result of the fact that he had served an earthly ruler.<sup>4</sup> During this period he wrote and completed within six months his first biblical commentaries, on Joshua, Judges and Samuel, and made a start on his commentary on Kings. The fact that he left his commentary on Deuteronomy unfinished and turned instead to the books of the Early Prophets has been seen as significant by Netanyahu, who described the latter works as "saturated with living thought." According to him this was the "first and perhaps only time that the main political part of the Bible was interpreted by a statesman."<sup>5</sup> By commenting on the Early Prophets Abravanel sought to come to terms with his unfortunate situation and began to develop the political philosophy which would be manifest in all of his exegetical works.

But in 1484 he had the opportunity to enter royal service again, this time at the court of King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile. These Christian monarchs appreciated his financial services so much that they made great efforts to convince him to convert. This would have allowed him to escape the fate of expulsion that they had imposed on their Jewish subjects in 1492.<sup>6</sup> But Abravanel refused to apostasize and prepared his family for departure for Italy, where he entered royal service once again, this time at the court of the king of Naples. And it was in Naples that he completed his commentary on Kings in the Fall of 1493. Only one year later Naples was occupied by the French and Abravanel's house and library were sacked while he himself briefly joined the abdicated

<sup>4</sup> Z. Abneri, "Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971): 2.104.

<sup>5</sup> Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Neapolitan king, Alfonso II, in his exile in Sicily.

After the king's death Abravanel moved to Corfu where he started a commentary on Isaiah and found the long-lost unfinished manuscript of his commentary on Deuteronomy, which he finally completed upon his return to Italy in 1496.<sup>7</sup> Dating from the same period are his messianic interpretations of Daniel (*Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah*), of the rabbinic sayings dealing with the Messiah (*Yeshu'ot Meshiho*) and of all biblical prophecies of redemption (*Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah*). He himself stated in *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah* that the catastrophe of the Expulsion from Spain caused him to search the biblical text for an explanation.<sup>8</sup> It was in these three works that he expressed his belief that the trials and tribulations which the Jewish community was experiencing in his lifetime were nothing less than the birth pangs of the Messiah.

Towards the end of his life, in 1503, Abravanel settled in Venice at the suggestion of his son Joseph. There he offered his services to a government one more time and became involved with diplomatic negotiations between Venice and Portugal. Before his death in 1508, Abravanel had completed commentaries on Jeremiah (published 1504), the Minor Prophets, Genesis and Exodus (published in 1505), and Leviticus and Numbers (published long after his death). In his commentaries on the first four books of the Torah he presented his most mature thoughts on the major historical, philosophical and political problems which he had addressed in his earlier works. As he remarked himself, these Torah commentaries included "all of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 73 and note 43.

<sup>8</sup> L. Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," in J. B. Trend and H. Loewe, eds., *Isaac Abravanel. Six Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937): 86.

my insights and all of my views.”<sup>9</sup> They reflect the wisdom and experience accumulated over a lifetime by a most unusual man who “combined a career of learning with the practice of public affairs in more than one country and at the highest level.”<sup>10</sup>

While Abravanel was a productive scholar in various branches of Jewish studies, his true fame rests on his endeavors as exegete. In a sense he is a transitional figure for he represents the last stage of classic medieval Jewish Bible exegesis while at the same time engaging in the kind of biblical exegesis which would develop in the period of Renaissance and Humanism.<sup>11</sup>

His dual career as statesman and scholar perhaps explains the rather unpredictable chronology of his works. Many of Abravanel’s commentaries were written within a very short time period and his periods of productive scholarship were often years removed from each other. The fact that this fitful writing style did nevertheless result in insightful and systematically written commentaries hints at a phenomenal memory and uncanny ability to focus and organize the experience of years.<sup>12</sup>

His need to be innovative and to go beyond a summary and evaluation of what his predecessors had written, frequently led Abravanel to forced interpretations.<sup>13</sup> His style is loquacious, his treatment of exegetical issues

<sup>9</sup> She’elot u-teshuvot, p. 8a, as quoted by Eric Jay Lawee, “‘Inheritance of the Fathers’: Aspects of Isaac Abravanel’s Stance towards Tradition” (Ph. D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1993): 42.

<sup>10</sup> Elie Kedourie, Spain and the Jews. The Sephardi Experience 1492 and After (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992): 11.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, Moshe (ed.) Jewish Bible Exegesis. An Introduction. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1983): 96 [Hebr.]

<sup>12</sup> Rabinowitz, “Abravanel as Exegete,” 77–78.

<sup>13</sup> Avraham Grossman, “Biblical Exegesis in Spain during the 13th–15th Centuries,” in Haim Beinart, ed.,

comprehensive but at times repetitive.<sup>14</sup> Especially in his commentaries on the Pentateuch he sometimes digresses from his main topic. These features of his style may reflect the origin of much of his written commentaries in oral presentations given in the synagogue.<sup>15</sup> They also reflect his dual goal to explain individual verses as thoroughly as possible and to comment on the large themes they contain.<sup>16</sup> Of such an attempt to do full justice to the biblical text "lengthy exposition is the inevitable corollary."<sup>17</sup>

Abravanel distanced himself from kabbalistic exegesis, although he strongly believed that the biblical text contained secret meanings in addition to its plain sense. He regularly combined allegorical interpretation with an appreciation of the plain meaning of the text. For him there could be no inconsistency between the literal and symbolical meaning.<sup>18</sup> In his commentary to Genesis 2:1-3 he wrote that "In the Law of Moses the external reading is true and corresponds to its meaning" while at the same time there is a need to probe further and understand "what is secretly implied in it."<sup>19</sup>

Abravanel made frequent use of rabbinic Midrash but would not Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy. Vol. I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1992): 145.

<sup>14</sup> According to M. Segal, Abravanel lacked the ability to be concise and to the point, and thus lacked a necessary qualification for being a successful parshan. Cf. M. Segal, "R. Isaac Abravanel as Interpreter of the Bible," Tarbiz 8 (1937): 264 [Hebr.].

<sup>15</sup> See the Introduction to Abravanel's Commentary on Joshua. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 36 and note 12.

<sup>16</sup> Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 156.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. See also Juda Bergmann, "Abrabanel's Stellung zur Agada," Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums 81 (1937): 270-280.

hesitate to criticize its teaching if it conflicted with his understanding of the text: "I shall not refrain from pointing to the weakness inherent in their statements where they are homiletical in nature and not accepted by them as authoritative."<sup>20</sup> Especially his commentaries on the Torah are replete with midrashic interpretations. His use of midrash has been studied extensively by Lawee, who wrote :

Abarbanel's insistence that, done correctly, biblical interpretation encompasses theological as well as exegetical concerns makes the regular reference and recourse to midrash in his exegetical works understandable, for it was in their midrashic and aggadic sayings that the sages broached the moral, theological, and philosophical issues that exercised Abarbanel throughout the course of his life. Naturally, then, Abarbanel was led to midrash in interpreting the Bible....Abarbanel's stress on Scripture's polysignificance suggests another reason for the ample place accorded midrash in his commentaries.<sup>21</sup>

There was one form of midrash which Abravanel rejected in principle, although he did sometimes make use of it himself, and that was philosophical midrash. This allegorical method of the rationalists had become popular in the wake of the influence of Aristotelian philosophy on the Jewish intellectual community of 12th century Spain. Abravanel's criticism of it was not so much a rejection of the midrashic method as such, as it was a result of his anti-rational stance and his inability to accept the teachings of philosophy as a source of truth.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As quoted by A. Grossman, "Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel," Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1971): 2.106. Cf. Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 152-154.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-158.

<sup>22</sup> Isaac E. Barzilay, Between Reason and Faith. Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought (Mouton: The Hague/Paris, 1967): 109-112.

Abravanel made liberal use of the exegesis of other biblical commentators, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Among Jewish commentators he utilized were Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, David Kimhi, and Ibn Caspi.<sup>23</sup> He was particularly influenced by Isaac Arama and Levi ben Gershon. Like the latter, and following the model of his Lisbon teacher Joseph Hayyun, he adopted the practice of dividing the biblical books into chapters which he prefaced with an introduction containing a set of exegetical problems pertaining to that chapter, whether of a philosophical, historical, theological or other nature.<sup>24</sup>

The length and comprehensive nature of his introductory statements, especially those prefacing the books of the Prophets, constituted one of the important innovations which he contributed to Jewish biblical exegesis. They were more elaborate than those of his predecessors and often reflected his keen interest in questions of authorship, authorial intention and provenance of the text,<sup>25</sup> the extensive treatment of which in and of itself was an innovation in Jewish exegesis.<sup>26</sup> He defended his method of presenting his

<sup>23</sup> Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," 79.

<sup>24</sup> Grossman, "Isaac ben Judah Abravanel," 2.106; Greenberg, *Jewish Bible Exegesis*, 96-98; Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 154. Others have argued that the method of writing introductions to different chapters and sections of the biblical text was developed first by the scholastics. Cf. J. Guttman, *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel* (Breslau: M. & M. Marcus, 1916): 6; Segal, "Don Isaac Abravanel," 266; and J. Bartolocius, *Vitae celeberrimorum Rabbiorum* (Utrecht: Jacob Poolsum & Jacob Broedelet, 1723): 114 as quoted by Solomon Gaon, *The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abravanel* (Hoboken, N.J. and New York, N.Y.: KTAV/Sephardic House, 1993): 30. Rabinowitz ("Abravanel as Exegete," 81-82) suggests that Abravanel may have borrowed his method of prefacing each section with questions from Alfonso Tostado. See below on Tostado's possible influence on Abravanel.

<sup>25</sup> Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*. Vol. II (New York: Bloch, 1933): 47; Abravanel's reflections on the status and origin of biblical texts has been discussed extensively by Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 374-400.

<sup>26</sup> Greenberg, *Jewish Bible Exegesis*, 96.

material in his Introduction to his Commentary on Joshua by expressing the hope that it would initiate discussion and encourage investigation.

His goal to explain the general content, views and moral lessons of the biblical text is something Abravanel had in common with Gersonides and Nahmanides, although "for the sake of brevity"<sup>27</sup> he paid almost no attention to grammatical issues, being convinced that they had been clarified sufficiently by his predecessors, especially Radak.<sup>28</sup> Abravanel's commentaries do not comment on the single verses of the text but explain the various sections as a whole in narrative fashion, freely paraphrasing the biblical text and incorporating his answers to the exegetical questions posed within the context of the paraphrase.<sup>29</sup>

Abravanel's second major innovation consisted in the fact that he was the first Jewish Bible commentator who extensively quoted Christian Bible commentators. Among his Christian sources were Jerome, Augustine, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Julius Africanus, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra and the convert Paul of Burgos.<sup>30</sup> According to A. Grossman, Abravanel was rather preoccupied with Christian exegesis and often disputed christological interpretations.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, he was willing to consider Christian interpretations, quoted them without prejudice and even adopted

<sup>27</sup> Abravanel makes this statement in his commentary to Ezekiel. See Segal, "Abravanel as Interpreter," 287.

<sup>28</sup> Waxman, Jewish Literature, 46; Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 155.

<sup>29</sup> Segal, "Abravanel as Interpreter," 263; Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," 81.

<sup>30</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, p. 38; Cf. Solomon Gaon, "Don Isaac Abravanel and the Christian Scholars," American Sephardi 6 (1973): 16-21; and J. Guttman, Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren, 45-47, as quoted by Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 410.

<sup>31</sup> Grossman, "Isaac ben Judah Abravanel," 2.107. See also Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 424-427.

them if he considered them to be correct.<sup>32</sup> Solomon Gaon has argued for the influence of an older contemporary, the Spanish Christian theologian Alfonso Tostado (Bishop of Avila, 1414-1454), on much of Abravanel's exegesis.<sup>33</sup> Although Abravanel never mentioned Tostado by name, Gaon considered it likely that he had utilized the Christian theologian's erudite commentaries, which were greatly popular in his days.<sup>34</sup> Gaon pointed to many similarities in structure and content between the commentaries of Abravanel and Tostado.<sup>35</sup>

Abravanel was also well-versed in classical literature and his writings reflect in particular the influence of Seneca and Cicero.<sup>36</sup> Among the other non-traditional sources which he used were the works of Josephus and Benjamin of Tudela.<sup>37</sup>

A special characteristic of Abravanel's exegesis and an expression of his personal piety was his eschatological emphasis, through which he sought to strengthen the belief in the coming of the Messiah among his coreligionists. This emphasis emerges primarily in his commentaries on the Books of the

<sup>32</sup> "Indeed I consider their words on this issue to be more acceptable than those of the rabbis that I have mentioned." (Abravanel's Answer to his Sixth Question on 1 Kings 8). Cf. Greenberg, Jewish Bible Exegesis, 96. For other examples of Abravanel's positive evaluation of Christian exegesis see Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 411-412.

<sup>33</sup> Gaon, Influence of Alfonso Tostado.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 27. Abravanel's frequent failure to quote his sources is well known. Cf. Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 476-478.

<sup>35</sup> Gaon, Influence, 29-44.

<sup>36</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 408-409. According to Baer, Abravanel was the first Jew after the anonymous author of Josippon who read the Latin translation of the major works of Flavius Josephus. Cf. Isaac Baer, "Don Isaac Abravanel and his Relation to Problems of History and Politics," Tarbiz 8 (1936/1937): 246.

Latter Prophets.

Abravanel's historical interpretations and especially his comparison of the political institutions and social structures of ancient Israel with those of the 15th century European society of his days, as illustrated by his discussion of the monarchy in his exegesis of 1 Samuel 8, reflect his firm conviction that God is revealed in history. This conviction and its application constitute the third real innovation he contributed to Jewish exegesis.<sup>38</sup>

In applying his life experiences and his knowledge and ability of statecraft to his scholarly endeavors, Abravanel not only justified his worldly endeavors to his own scholarly inclined persona, but he also brought a different perspective to biblical studies.

Thus Abravanel's exegetical style provided much that was new and he deserves to be considered the last of the great Jewish Bible commentators of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>38</sup> Grossman, "Isaac ben Judah Abravanel," 2.106.

## Chapter Two: Abravanel's Commentary on Genesis 49: 1-28.

### Questions One through Eight

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בָּנָיו And Jacob called unto his sons ... (Gen 49:1), etc. until the end of the section.

In connection with these verses I also formulated a number of questions:

The first question deals with the text: הָאִסְפוּ וְאֶגִּידָה Gather yourselves together that I may tell you (Gen 49:1) ... הַקְבִּצוּ וּשְׁמְעוּ Assemble yourselves, and hear, ye sons of Jacob (Gen 49:2). Why does he [Jacob] utter a command twice concerning their coming together and assembling? And why does he in the first instance say [after the command to assemble] וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם בְּאַחֲרִית הַיָּמִים that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days (Gen 49:1), and in the second instance he does not say this but וּשְׁמְעוּ אֵל אֲבִיכֶם and hearken unto Israel your father (Gen 49:2)?

The second question deals with the overall purpose of these blessings. And that is because it is impossible for us to say that Jacob's purpose in this testament to his sons was either one of four possible goals or all four of them.

Perhaps they were meant to serve as (i) a blessing or petition concerning all the blessed things with which he would bless them, as is written after

them [i.e. the individual blessings] ויברך אותם איש אשר כברכתו ברך אותם and he blessed them, every one according to his blessing he blessed them (Gen 49:28); or (ii) perhaps they served to admonish them for the reprehensible actions which he saw in them, as it is said: וזא אשר דבר להם אביהם ויברך אותם and this is what their father spoke unto them and he blessed them (ibid.); or (iii) they may have served to let them know the things which would occur to their descendants in the future, or (iv) it could be that their purpose was to let them know their inheritance in the promised land.

If we would say that these words of Jacob were meant to be a (i) blessing, as it appears from the blessing of Judah and from the blessings of Dan and Asher and Joseph, then a problem arises with what he says about Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Issachar, Gad and Benjamin. For according to what is said about them, he brought a curse upon them and not a blessing. But if we would say that (ii) he meant to rebuke them for their reprehensible acts, as it appears from the blessings of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Issachar and Benjamin, there is a great problem with what he says about Judah, Zebulun, Dan, Asher, Joseph and Naphtali, because they do not receive a rebuke but blessings and foretelling of the future. And if we would say that (iii) he meant to foretell their future, as appears from the blessings of Judah, Dan, Gad, Asher, and Benjamin, there is a great problem with what is said about Reuben, Simeon and Levi, and Naphtali, which does not mention their future but consists of rebuke. And if we would say that (iv) he meant to announce to them their inheritance, as appears from the blessing of Judah, whose land will have abundant wine (cf. Gen 49:12) and Zebulun who will dwell at the shore of the sea (cf. Gen 49:13), and Asher

whose bread shall be fat (cf. Gen 49:20) etc., then there is a problem with what he says about Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin, about whom he did not speak in this manner.

If this is the case [that the blessing can not be categorized into any one category], then what is the overall purpose of the blessings?

The third question deals with what is written about Simeon and Levi: **אחלקם ביעקב ואפיצם בישראל** I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel (Gen 49:7), for behold, his prediction came true for Levi, for he was scattered and separated among the tribes but as far as Simeon is concerned, nowhere in Scripture is it found that he would be scattered among the tribes.

The fourth question deals with the statement **לא יסור שבט מיהודה עד כי יבא שילה** The scepter shall not depart from Judah ... until he will come to Shiloh (Gen 49:10). It teaches that he [Judah] will always have the kingship and that when Shiloh will come the scepter shall depart from him. But behold this is not so, for Saul, who was the first king, came from the tribe of Benjamin, and not from Judah. And Jeroboam and all the other kings of Israel were not from the tribe of Judah. Moreover, in the Second Temple period the Hasmoneans and the Herodians ruled. And after that kingship ceased completely, from the tribe of Judah as well as from the other tribes. If so, how then were the words of the Patriarch and his prophecies **לא יסור שבט מיהודה** The scepter shall not depart from Judah (ibid.) fulfilled?

Moreover, the text **עד כי יבא שילה** until he will come to Shiloh

(ibid.), whether it refers to King David or whether it refers to the Messiah, may he speedily be revealed, has not been fulfilled according to the commentators, for with the coming of David the kingship was taken over by the tribe of Judah and it did not depart from it. Likewise we believe that when the Messiah son of David will come, the kingship will be in his possession and that it will not depart at that time. This statement, in its use of the word עד, does not resemble the statement: לא יתיצב איש לפניך עד (BHS: בפניך) until you have wiped them out (Deut 7:24), for after he has destroyed them, it does not make any sense that they would stand up to him. And similarly [I will not leave you] עד אשר אם עשיתי את אשר דברתי לך until I have done what I have promised you (Gen 28:15), for surely once He has done what He promised, He will already give up that protection. On the explanation of this verse I will quote the opinions of the commentators.

The fifth question deals with the blessings of Issachar and Dan for it is not clear from them whether their content is positive or negative, whether he praised Issachar for bowing his shoulder to bear (cf. Gen 49:15) or denounced him because of it. And similarly with Dan who ידין shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel (Gen 49:16), in which respect he holds him equal to the rest of the tribes. But why does it say about him: לישועתך קויתי ה' I wait for your salvation, Lord (Gen 49:18), which he does not say about any other tribe?

The sixth question deals with what is said about Naphtali, that he

is **אֵילָה שְׁלוּחָהּ הַנּוֹתֵן אִמְרֵי שֵׁפָר** a hind let loose who gives goodly words (Gen 49:21). For what connection is there between a hind and "goodly words"? Will the hind utter goodly words in speech? Or why does he compare him with a hind to which he attributes goodly words?

The seventh question deals with the order in which the blessings of the tribes are mentioned, for note that he mentioned Zebulun before Issachar, which is the reverse of the order of their birth. Likewise he mentions Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah, the maidservant of Leah, before Naphtali the son of Bilhah, the maidservant of Rachel. And it is well known that Dan and Naphtali were born first and Gad and Asher after them.

The eighth question deals with the text **וַיֹּאמֶר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אֲבִיהֶם** and **וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם** and this is what their father said to them and he blessed them, every one according to his blessing he blessed them (Gen 49:28). And the question is why he said these two things, the first being **וַיֹּאמֶר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אֲבִיהֶם** and this is what their father said to them, and the second one being **וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם** and he blessed them, for the two are one and the same thing and not two. And what is the meaning of the words **אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּבְרַכְתּוֹ בֵּרַךְ אוֹתָם** every one according to his blessing he blessed them, for it was his [Jacob's] blessing with which he blessed them. But how can we understand the phrase **[כִּבְרַכְתּוֹ according to his blessing]** as referring back to himself [Jacob]? This matter really is unclear.

### Answer to the First Question.

And Jacob called unto his sons and said: Gather yourselves together (Gen 49:1) until יהודה Judah, your brothers will praise you (Gen 49:8).

After Jacob had privately spoken to Joseph concerning his [Joseph's] sons, and had blessed them, he summoned his other sons as well in order not to arouse jealousy among them. And I interpret the parallel statements האספו ואגידה לכם Gather yourselves together that I may tell you (Gen 49:1) and הקבצו ושמעו Assemble yourselves, and hear (Gen 49:2) to mean that Jacob realized that some of his sons would spurn his rebuke and his words and perhaps, out of fear that he would rebuke them with harsh words, they kept their distance and did not draw near to him. Therefore his first words to them were: האספו ואגידה לכם את אשר יקרא Gather yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days (Gen 49:1), so that they would think that it was not his intention to rebuke them but to reveal to them hidden and secret matters pertaining to the future, for every person yearns to know what the future has in store.

And after they had all assembled in his presence, then he said to them: הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב Assemble yourselves, and hear, ye sons of Jacob (Gen 49:2). In other words, because you are my sons, it is not fitting that you should spurn my rebukes. Let my words not be too hard on you, but הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב Assemble yourselves, and hear, ye sons of Jacob (Gen 49:2), for it is fitting that you should listen to Israel your father [paraphrasing ושמעו בני יעקב and hearken unto Israel your father] that is to say, because of the fact that he is Israel who

strove with God and with men<sup>1</sup> and because of the fact that he is your father.

And thus he admonished them to pay attention to his words, because he would convey through them by profound poetic expression and refinement of words and also by that which would be expressed in unusual language, the way in which the prophecy reached him at the hour of his death.

He also intended to convey with the words **הִקְבִּצוּ** **Assemble yourselves ... [ye sons of Jacob]** (Gen 49:2), that they all would merit blessing, which had not been the case with all the sons of Abraham and Isaac.

And with this the first question has been answered.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen 32:29.

### Answer to the Second Question

It is also possible to explain the text to mean that because in his blessings he would foretell their future as well as rebuke them for their deeds, he therefore made these two statements: (1) **האספו ואגידה לכם את** (1) **Gather yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days** (Gen 49:1), is an allusion to matters pertaining to the future which he would mention in his blessings, and (2) concerning matters of rebuke which he would also bring up, he said: **הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב ושמעו אל ישראל** **Assemble yourselves, and hear, ye sons of Jacob, and hearken unto Israel your father** (Gen 49:2).

And our Sages of blessed memory said that our Father Jacob sought to reveal the end [ i.e. the future] and that the Shekhinah was removed from him.<sup>2</sup> And it is the following text which led them to this interpretation: **האספו ואגידה לכם את** **that which shall befall you in the end of days** (Gen 49:1), for as Ramban said [ad loc.]: "In the opinion of all scholars, **באחרית הימים** **the end of days** refers to the days of the Messiah whom we expect." And how could that not be so? For he [Jacob] said: **עד כי יבא שילה** **until Shiloh comes** (Gen 49:10) which cannot be interpreted in any other way than referring to the King Messiah.

Furthermore, they [the Sages] said in the midrash that the words **האספו ואגידה לכם את** **Gather yourselves together that I may tell you that which shall befall you** (Gen 49:1), allude to the period of the Second Temple at which time they were all assembled there, and that the words **הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב** **Assemble yourselves,**

<sup>2</sup> bPes 56a; GenR. 98:2, 99:5.

and hear, ye sons of Jacob (Gen 49:2), allude to the future redemption, for then all the exiles would be assembled and would listen to their father Israel and walk in his ways.

And according to the plain meaning of the text **בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים** in the **end of days** (Gen 49:1) refers to a certain length of time which lies in the future, approximately until the wilderness period.

I am, however, inclined to the opinion that the intention of these statements and blessings is that, at his death, Jacob wanted to explain from which one of his sons the scepter of royalty and the dominion over his seed would go forth, for he saw and knew the power of his prophecies, that his seed would increase greatly and that it would befit them to appoint a leader or king as executive officer and ruler, and in order that no dispute would arise among them concerning the appointment of a king, at the hour of his death the old man saw fit to clarify from which of their tribes the leadership and kingship would come, and through which kings would rule. And on account of this he thoroughly investigated each one of his sons according to their character and qualities to see who would be worthy of the kingship. Since the character of the sons typically accords with the character of their fathers, and since the one who would be the most exalted of them would [at the same time] always be similar to them [because they were all sons of the same father, namely Jacob], for the character of the source is typically discernible in that which has been hewn from it, therefore, on this basis, he mentioned for every one of his sons, first their individual characteristics, and then what the future held in store for their descendants, not for the purpose of blessing, and not for the purpose of rebuke, and not in order to foretell the future, and not to describe their status in the land, but to make

known whether they were fit for kingship and authority or not. The second question has been answered.

### Answer to the Third Question

And he started with Reuben because he was the first-born and he said: בכורי אתה **You are my first-born** (Gen 49: 3), that is to say, it is true that you are the first-born among my sons and that you were כחי **my might and the first-fruit of my strength** (Gen 49:3), because you were born when I was young, when I was at the peak of my virility and therefore עז **יתר שאת ויתר** **the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power** (Gen 49:3), that is to say that it would have been fitting for you to be superior in rank and dignity for the word שאת **'dignity'** (Gen 49:3) implies superiority in rank as in הלא שאתו **His dignity/majesty will terrify you** (Job 13:11). And it also would have been fitting that that same שאת **'excellency'** entail עז **'power'** (Gen 49:3), that is, excellency and very great superiority in respect to the kingship. This interpretation is based on ויתן עז למלכו **He will give strength to His king** (1 Sam 2:10).

Is it not true, however, that because you were פתו כמים **unstable as water** (Gen 49:4), fickle-minded, unsettled in your thinking, therefore אל **you are not superior** (Gen 49:4), you are not fitting for excellency and superiority over your brothers? And the meaning of the word פתו **'unstable'** (Gen 49:4) will have to be understood from "*It is heedless people who speak before listening*".<sup>3</sup> The meaning is rashness, fickle-mindedness and lack of wisdom. And he [Jacob] said that his recklessness came out in the fact that he mounted his father's bed and thereby חללת **you defiled** (Gen 49:4) it, יצועי עלה **my couch he mounted** (Gen 49:4), and he departed. He [Jacob] said this because, as Ramban wrote: "*It*

<sup>3</sup> bShab 88a; Abravanel borrowed this interpretation from Ramban ad loc.

*was Reuben's intention to disqualify Bilhah from his father so that she would no longer give birth to other sons and [thereby] diminish his share as the firstborn. Therefore he said to him that it was recklessness and fickle-mindedness to think that he would gain, [for, on the contrary] he did not derive any profit from it" (Ramban on Gen 49:4).*

And in reference to this the prophet [Jacob] revealed to Reuben that he would not be considered first-born as far as rank and kingship was concerned, and this is what is written in Chronicles: **ובחללו יצועי אביו נתנה בכורתו לבני יוסף בן ישראל ולו [ולא] להתיחס לבכורה כי יהודה גבר** ...forasmuch as he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, and *he was the one who* [MT: ולא]<sup>4</sup> was reckoned in the genealogy as the first-born. For Judah prevailed over his brothers and of him came he that is the prince, but the birthright was Joseph's (1 Chron 5:1-2). And Scripture here explains that Reuben was not worthy of the birthright and the kingship.

And it is possible that he also alluded with this to the sin which the descendants of Reuben would commit later on, when in their recklessness<sup>5</sup> they would take the land at the other side of the Jordan as their portion, not having understood the prediction of their future.<sup>6</sup>

In like manner our teachers of blessed memory commented on this kind of portion: **נחלה מבוהלת בראשונה ואחריתה לא תבורך** An estate acquired in haste at the outset will not be blessed in the end

<sup>4</sup> The standard translation according to the MT would be: "...so he is not reckoned as first-born..."

<sup>5</sup> Again a word-play on נחש.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Deut 32:20 as well as Prov 20:21 below.

(Prov 20:21). And they also said: "לִב כְּסִיל לְשִׁמְאֹלוֹ" the heart of the fool is inclined to its left (= wrong?) side (Eccl. 10:2). These are the sons of Reuben."<sup>7</sup>

It follows from this that Reuben was not qualified for the kingship from the perspective of his own character as well as the nature of his sons and their character traits.

And our Teacher Moses, may he rest in peace, already alluded to this matter as well in his blessings, when he said: יַחֲיֵי רֵאוּבֵן וְאֵל יָמוּת וִיְהִי מִתִּיּוֹ **May Reuben live and not die, though few be his numbers** (Deut 33:6). For he [Moses] prayed on his [Reuben's] behalf that he would not die because he took his portion from the other side of the Jordan in dangerous territory, and also because of the way that he sinned against his father. And because of the diminution of his [Reuben's] population he said: **יַחֲיֵי רֵאוּבֵן וְאֵל יָמוּת וִיְהִי מִתִּיּוֹ though few be his numbers** (Deut 33:6).

And after this he discussed Simeon who was born after Reuben, and Levi who was born after Simeon, and he combined the two for the reason which he would mention in connection with the two of them which was one and the same, namely the one the text refers to with: שְׁמֵעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֲחֵים כֻּלֵּי **Simeon and Levi are brothers. Their weapons are tools of lawlessness** (Gen 49: 5). By calling them אֲחֵים 'brothers', he taught that they had the same character traits for they were brothers in terms of their personality.

And it is possible to interpret the word אֲחֵים 'brothers', in reference to Dinah. [According to that interpretation] he said that Simeon and Levi considered themselves in great brotherly kinship to their sister Dinah and

<sup>7</sup> Cf. NumR. 22.9 and Tanhuma Mattot, 7.

responsible for avenging her, for they were furious on behalf of her honor.

But **מכירותיהם כלי חמס** **their weapons are tools of lawlessness** (Gen 49:5). The word **מכירותיהם** is a *hapax*<sup>8</sup> but in terms of meaning it is best to interpret it either as referring to 'trade' or as referring to 'thought', that is to say [that the passage would mean] "all their buying and selling and acquiring..." or "all their thoughts" are only geared towards creating lawlessness and robbery, as if their very thoughts were tools of lawlessness.

And he said: "Do not praise them in the intimacies of an assembly,"<sup>9</sup> because they did not reveal to anyone their deception of the men of Shechem by bringing them into the covenant of circumcision only to kill them. Do not praise them for caring about their honor in their saying: **הוֹנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת אֲחֹתָנוּ** **Should our sister be treated like a whore?** (Gen 34:31), for **בְּסוּדָם** **their council** (Gen 49:6) which they held concerning this **אֶל** **let my soul not enter**. And **בְּקֶהֱלָם** **in their assembly** which they called against the men of Shechem to kill them because of a matter of honor, **אֶל תַּחַד כְּבוֹדִי** **let not my honor be counted** (Gen 49:6), and he said **אֶל תַּחַד ... אֶל תְּבֹא** as if he addressed his soul and his honor, "do not rejoice, my soul!" "do not rejoice, my honor!" For **בְּאַפָּם** **in their anger they slew men** (Gen 49:6), that is to say, if they committed this deed in anger and wrath about the defilement of honor, they should have killed only Shechem and in that case I would have granted that in their anger they killed that man. But what about the rest of the

<sup>8</sup> The terms for a *hapax legomenon* used by medieval Jewish exegetes vary. They include **מִלָּה יְחִידָה** (used by Moses Kimhi, Ibn Parhon and David Qimhi, or **מִלָּה זָרָה** used by Abraham ibn Ezra and here by Abravanel. See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew* (SBL Dissertation Series 74; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984): p. 4 and notes 11, 12 and 13. The word **מִכְרָה** is not an absolute *hapax* but is also found in Zeph 2:9.

<sup>9</sup> Presumably a wordplay on Ps 55:15 **בְּמַחֲקֵי סוּד**.

people in the city who entered the covenant of God, why did they kill them as well? Undoubtedly they did not act in anger, for the people of the city had not done anything wrong in this incident, but rather, **עקרו שור** they **tore up shor** (Gen 49:6), that is to say, they tore up the entire city in order to rob its wealth. For **מכרותיהם** **their weapons** were **כלי חמס** **tools of lawlessness** Gen 49:5) and **שור** is another word for 'wall', i.e. the city-wall. Its meaning is that they destroyed that city from its foundation, **ערו ערו** **Strip her, strip her** (Ps 137:7), including the wall and its foundations to rob everything that was in it.

And our sages of blessed memory said that this [the violent nature of Simeon and Levi] is also proven by the incident with Joseph, when they said: **ועתה לכו ונהרגהו** **Come now, let us kill him** (Gen 37:20), and that this is what the text means when it says: **עקרו שור** **they maim oxen at will** (Gen 49:6), and [by] this is [meant] Joseph, who was 'the master of harvests' from the phrase **ורב תבואות בכח שור** **But a rich harvest** [Abravanel reads **רב** as 'master'] **comes through the strength of the ox** (Prov. 14:4). And that is the reason that our Teacher Moses of blessed memory said about him [Joseph]: **שורו הדר לו** **like a firstling bull in his majesty** (Deut 33:17).

Therefore he [Jacob] cursed their wrath and their anger, but God forbid that he cursed his sons. Rather, it was in reference to their anger that he said: **ארוור אפם כי עז ועברתם כי קשתה** **Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless** (Gen 49:7). I also think that he did not only blame them for what happened in Shechem, but also for the matter of Shittim,<sup>10</sup> when the ones who sinned were Simeonites.<sup>11</sup> As

<sup>10</sup> The Baal Peor incident in Numbers 25.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra wrote: "*their number is the proof, even their chieftain.*"<sup>12</sup>

And likewise he [Jacob] blamed Levi, for it was about the incident with Korach and his associates who were Levites who banded together against Moses, that he [Jacob] said: **וּבְקִהְלָם אֶל תַּחַד כְּבוֹדִי** let my honor not be counted in their assembly (Gen 49:6), **כִּי בְאִפְּם הִרְגוּ אִישׁ** for in their anger they slew a man (Gen 49:6). This refers to what happened in Shechem where they killed all the men of the city. The word **אִישׁ** is a collective just as in the phrase **אִישׁ יְהוּדָה** the men of Judah.<sup>13</sup> They did not distinguish between innocent and guilty, but they killed all men.

And he said: **וּבְרִצּוֹנָם עֲקְרוּ שׁוֹר** When pleased they maim oxen (Gen 49:6), in connection with the incident at Shittim and the matter of Korach. The word **שׁוֹר** comes from the same root as **אֲשׁוּרְנוּ** in the verse: **אֲשׁוּרְנוּ וְלֹא קָרוֹב** What I behold will not be soon (Numb 24:17). For

<sup>11</sup> Numb 25:14 mentions one of the offenders by name as Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house.

<sup>12</sup> I could not find such a statement by Ibn Ezra either on Gen 49 or Numb 25. Rashi mentions a Tanchuma tradition in his comments on Numb 26:13: "*Rabbi Tanchuma explained that they (i.e. the families of several of the Israelite tribes which had been mentioned earlier in the Torah but which are not included in the census described in the book of Numbers) died by the plague in the matter of Balaam (Numb 25:9). But this can hardly be so because according to the deficiency that shows itself in the tribe of Simeon in this census, as compared with the first census in the wilderness of Sinai, it would appear that all the twenty four thousand who died of that plague must have fallen from the tribe of Simeon.*" M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann pointed out that Tanchuma actually contradicted himself in this matter for in his exegesis of Gen 49:7 he too asserted that all 24,000 who fell in the aftermath of the Baal Peor incident were Simeonites (cf. Tanchuma, Vayehi, 10, 12). Cf. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary. Numbers (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1972/3): 207. Thus Ibn Ezra's unidentified comment seems to indicate that both the mentioning of the Simeonite chieftain in Numb 25:14 as well as the dramatic decline in the Simeonite census—59,300 in the first one (Numb 1:23) versus 22,200 in the second one—indicates that the Simeonites were the ones who sinned and were punished.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Judg 15:10; especially frequent in the books of Samuel: 1 Sam 11:8, 15:4; 2 Sam 19:15, 19:42, 43, 44, 2 Sam 20:2, 4, 24:9.

seeing that Bileam, inspired by the holy spirit, saw the merit of Israel and blessed them, but these transgressors from the tribe of Simeon uprooted this prophecy and its blessing,<sup>14</sup> and likewise Korach and his band intended and planned to uproot the prophecy of Moses, therefore the old man [Jacob] said in figurative language: **וּבְרָצוֹנָם עָקְרוּ שׁוֹר** that is to say, they fully intended to uproot the **שׁוֹר** which is an expression for a prophet—whether in connection with [the prophet of any] nation or with Moses—who has prophetic visions. Therefore he said: **אָרוּר אַפֶּם** **cursed be their anger**, for in their anger they destroyed Shechem, and the word **עֲבַרְתֶּם**, **their wrath**, refers to their transgression<sup>15</sup> of the command of the Lord at Shittim **כִּי קִשְׁתָּה** **so relentless** (Gen 49:7), for that is how relentless it was at the time.

And therefore **אֶחָדָם בִּיעַקֵּב** **I will divide them in Jacob** (Gen 49:7), that is to say that Simeon and Levi will not have their inherited portions next to each other, and also, as for the tribe of Simeon in particular, I will divide them so that his descendants will not have an inheritance to itself, but it will be among the inheritance of the rest of the tribes, as it is written: “The portion of Simeon shall be within the portion of the sons of Judah and their cities will be separated from each other” [namely by the territory of Judah].<sup>16</sup>

And concerning the sons of Levi he said: **וְאֶפִּיצָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל** **I will scatter them in Israel** (Gen 49:7), which refers to the forty eight cities

<sup>14</sup> In the Baal Peor incident in Numbers 25 which follows immediately upon the Balaam blessings.

<sup>15</sup> This is a standard word-play between **עָבַר** ‘wrath’ and **עָבַר** ‘transgression’.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Josh 19:9 but this is not a direct biblical quote. Since Abravanel uses a quotation formula here he may have quoted from memory. Prof. Alan Cooper suggested that he may also be referring to Midrash Tehillim 90, par. 3.

and their pasture grounds (cf. Numb 35:1-8) among the territory of Israel, and they consist of the cities of refuge which are assigned to the Levites which were scattered among the territories of all the tribes.

And on the basis of this the old man foresaw that the tribes of Simeon and Levi were not qualified for the kingship, because כלי חמס מכרותיכם **their weapons are tools of lawlessness** (Gen 49:5), while a king establishes a country with law and a king rules with justice, not with lawlessness. Another reason [that they were not qualified] is that their descendants would be scattered and separated among the rest of the tribes, which is not fitting for a king.

And the reader might at this point ask why the tenth generation of Reuben, Simeon and Levi are here punished for the sin of their forefathers, even though the sons were righteous and worthy, and especially the sons of Levi who were set apart from the rest of the tribes to perform the work in the sanctuary, while Jacob did not mention this [i.e., the fact that their descendants were worthy] here in his blessing. And the answer is that these blessings of Jacob were not uttered by him according to his will, for if so, he would have given the kingship to Joseph, for he loved him more than Judah, and he would have given it as well to Benjamin, for he, rather than Judah, was the son of his old age. He gave him [Benjamin], however, a short blessing and compared him to זאב יטרף **a ravenous wolf** (Gen 49:27), while he gave a greater blessing to Dan who was the son of a handmaid, because he was only able to bless according to God's will. And God may He be blessed wanted the old man to announce that the unfortunate portion of Reuben and Simeon and Levi was the consequence of their misconduct and the violence which stained their hands, in order to imprint

upon their souls the fear of the punishment of evil and the consequences of sin.

Another reason is that of all the tribal members there were none that caused so much grief as the men of these three tribes, as you find in the case of Korah and his band who were from the tribe of Levi, and Datan and Abiram and most of the two hundred and fifty who were from the tribe of Reuben.<sup>17</sup> And, as I said, in the incident at Shittim the majority [of the offenders] were Simeonites (cf. Numb 25:14) and twenty-four thousand of them died there.<sup>18</sup> And the old man did not mention at all that the tribe of Levi would serve in the sanctuary, for this happened after the sin of the Golden Calf.<sup>19</sup>

The third question has been answered.

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<sup>17</sup> The biblical text does not identify the 250 supporters of Dathan and Abiram as mostly Reubenites in Numb 16:1-2. But Dathan and Abiram are identified as Reubenites in Numb 26:8-9 and in his explanation of בני ראובן (Numb 16:1) Rashi points out that this term covered their main associate On son of Peleth as well. Rashi then extended this identification to include most the 250 supporters of Dathan and Abiram as follows: "*Because the tribe of Reuben had their place when they encamped, in the South, thus being neighbors of Kohat and his sons, who, too, encamped in the South (cf. Numb 3:29) they joined Korah in his quarrel...What did he (i.e. Korah) do? He arose and assembled two hundred and fifty men, fitted to be heads of the Sanhedrin, most of them of the tribe of Reuben who were his neighbors, such as Elizur the son of Sedeur (a prince of the tribe of Reuben, cf. Numb 1:16) and his colleagues...*" Rashi intimated that he based his midrashic exegesis primarily on Midrash Tanhuma.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Numb 25:9, but there the number is given in reference to the Israelites.

<sup>19</sup> Exod. 32:29: "Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day...that He may bestow a blessing upon you today."

### Answer to the Fourth Question

יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise (Gen 49:8) until יָשְׁכֹן זְבֻלֹן לְחוּף יָמִים זְבֻלֹן Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore (Gen 49:13).

After he [Jacob] finished with his investigation of the matter of kingship and governance in connection with Reuben and Simeon and Levi, he discussed his fourth son, Judah. He said, that, truly, according to his characteristics and qualities, he was worthy of lordship and from among his sons he singled him out as king. And that is what the text refers to when it says: יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise (Gen 49:8), that is to say, "As for you, my son Judah, I see four reasons for which you are more suitable for the kingship than your brothers."

The first reason is that your brothers will praise your merit, even though people generally envy the merit of their brothers more than they envy that of strangers. For because they are brothers they assume that it would be fitting for them to be equals and that it would be wrong for one to rule over the other, because they are brothers. But Judah's brothers all yielded to him and acknowledged his kingship, which is what the text refers to by יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise, for they were not envious of him as they had been of Joseph.

And the second reason is that you will be victorious in war and therefore you are qualified to fight the wars of the Lord and it is in reference to this that he said: יָדְךָ בְּעֹרֶף אוֹיְבֶיךָ your hand shall be on the nape of your foes (Gen 49:8). It resembles the statement of David: וְאוֹיְבֵי נָתַתִּי לִי עֹרֶף My enemies I made turn tail before me (Ps 18:41), that is to say that all your enemies will flee before you and will

turn their back to you and you will pursue them and overtake them. That is what the text means by **ידך בעורף אויבך** **your hand shall be on the nape of your foes**. And because of this **ישתחוו לך בני אביך** **your father's sons shall bow low to you** (Gen 49:8). Not just the sons of your mother but also the sons of your father by all his wives will bow low to you, for most people will bow low before army commanders for fighting their wars, as it is written: **ישראל לגדעון משול בנו גם אתה גם בנך גם בן** (Then said the men of) Israel to Gideon: **'Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson as well, for you have saved us from the Midianites'** (Judg 8:22).

And the third reason is that you are not an evil trickster like Simeon and Levi and not **פחז כמים** **unstable as water** (Gen 49:4) like Reuben, and for these two reasons he said: **גור אריה יהודה מטרף בני עלית** **Judah is a lion's whelp; on prey, my son, have you grown** (Gen 49: 9), that is to say, "Judah, you are like a young lion who does not yet seize prey, but who is potentially a predator," and that is the meaning of **מטרף בני עלית**, that is to say, "You, my son, have risen above all prey and violence and you have removed yourself [from these], for your weapons are not **כלי חמס** **tools of lawlessness** (Gen 49:5) like those of Simeon and Levi." So that is the third reason, that you are righteous and upright and far removed from lawless violence. And it is possible that he [Jacob] also alludes here to the incident with Joseph, where he [Judah] recommended not to kill him but said: **מה בצע כי נהרוג את אחינו** **What do we gain by killing our brother...?** (Gen 37:26). Therefore he said: **מטרף בני עלית**, that is to say, "You have risen above the prey of my son Joseph and you have removed yourself from him."

And the fourth reason is that you possess the quality of survival and the display of great power just like a big lion, and you are not **פחז כמים** **unstable as water** like Reuben. This is the meaning of **כרע רבץ כאריה** **he crouches, lies down like a lion, like the king of beasts (NJV)—who dare rouse him (Gen 49:9)**, that is to say, he lies down like the great lion and its mother the lioness; and who would not be terrified of rousing him? Thus of these two qualities which a lion possesses, one bad and the other one good, you possess the good one and not the bad one.

And for these four reasons I explain and decree that **לא יסור שבט מיהודה** **the scepter shall not depart from Judah (Gen 49: 10)**. This is the scepter of justice, the scepter of kingship.

When he said **ומחוקק מבין רגליו** **nor the ruler's staff from between his feet (Gen 49:10)**, this can be expounded in reference to the ruler who is a lawgiver and formulator of laws, a governor and commander of nations. Or perhaps **לא יסור ... מחוקק** refers to the scribe, for the engraver and scribe are always at the ruler's disposal to write down whatever he commands.

As for his saying **עד כי יבא שילה** **until Shiloh comes (Gen 49:10)**, there are those who interpret this in connection with David, for they read Shiloh as **בנו** 'his son',<sup>20</sup> in the manner in which we understand: **ובשלייתה היוצאת** **the afterbirth that issues (from between her legs) (Deut 28:57)**. On the basis of this [understanding of Deut 28:57] one should according to Ibn Ezra understand the phrase **לא תשלה אותי** **don't mislead**

<sup>20</sup> I.e. interpreting the suffix *-oh* as the 3d pers. sg. masc. possessive pron. suffix to a noun which has the same meaning as **בן** 'son'.

me (2 Kgs 4:28) as לא תוליד "you cannot make me bear children."

And the word יקהת (Gen 49:10) expresses the notion of קבוץ 'gathering' as in [ו]תבון ליקהת [עמים] אם and disdains the homage due a mother (Prov 30:17),<sup>21</sup> that is to say: "[and disdains] the old mother in whom many years have been gathered."<sup>22</sup> Thus [the passage in Gen 49:10 means] that when Judah's son, who is David, will come, many of the tribes will gather with him.

Or perhaps Shiloh is the name of a city for thus it is used in the phrase משכן שילה the tabernacle of Shiloh (Ps 78:60), and one might explain כי בא השמש in analogy to the phrase כי בא השמש for the sun had set (Gen 28: 11). And he [Jacob] said that Judah would always have the merit of rulership over his brothers until the decline of Shilo and the destruction of the sanctuary of Shilo. For at that time the peoples, who are the tribes of Israel, will assemble and gather themselves to him, that is Judah, in order that one of his descendants might rule over them. That is why the text says: ויטוש משכן שילה He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh (Ps 78:60) and ויבחר בדוד עבדו and He choose David, His servant (Ps 79:70).

And it is correct to interpret ולו יקהת עמים and the homage of peoples is his (Gen 49:10), in reference to Judah, meaning that a great people would gather about him, that is to say, that the descendants of Judah would be numerous in population as in ליקהת אם the [wrinkles] gathered [in the face of an old] mother (Prov 30:17).

<sup>21</sup> Note that Abravanel reads the word עמים of Gen 49:10 also in the Proverbs quote.

<sup>22</sup> Rashi gives the same explanation of יקהת in Gen 49:10 by referring to Prov. 30:17 and explaining ליקהת [עמים] there as "the gathering of wrinkles in her face due to old age." Cf. Rashi ad loc.

Some interpret this verse in reference to the Messiah son of David, for when he comes the nations will gather around him and surrender.

And as to the problem I mentioned above in the context of Question Four, our sages of blessed memory proposed two ways of solving it.

The first proposed solution occurs in [the Babylonian Talmud] tractate Sanhedrin (5a): "לא יסור שבט מיהודה" *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* (Gen 49:10) refers to the Exilarchs in Babylon who rule the people. ומחוקק מבין רגליו *nor the ruler's staff from between his feet* (ibid.) refers to the descendants of Hillel who teach Torah to the masses."

The second proposed solution in which they explained this entire prophecy [of Jacob] solely in reference to the future coming of the Messiah, occurs in Midrash Bereshit Rabba (99.8) and also in Midrash Yelammedenu: "לא יסור שבט מיהודה" *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* (Gen 49:10) refers to the royal throne, as it is said: כסאך אלהים עולם ועד *Your throne given of God is for ever and ever, (a scepter of equity is the scepter of your kingdom)* (Ps 45:7). לא יסור שבט מיהודה *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* (Gen 49:10) refers to the Messiah son of David who will have dominion as it said: תרועם בשבט ברזל *You shall break them with a rod of iron* (Ps 2:9). ומחוקק מבין רגליו *nor the ruler's staff from between his feet* (Gen 49:10) when the one will come about whom it is written: ברגלים תרמסנה *(The crown of pride of the drunkards of Ephraim) shall be trodden under foot* (Isa 28:3). שילה עד כי יבא *until Shilo comes* (Gen 49:10), meaning 'when the one will come to whom the kingship belongs' and ולו יקהת עמים *about whom the nations will gather* (ibid.), the one who breaks the

power of both of them, as it is written: **ישימו יד על פה** *Let them put hand to mouth (Mic 7:16).*"

And this was the opinion which Rabbenu Nissim wrote down in his expositions, namely, that the saying **עד כי יבא שילה** means "when Shilo comes."

The Ramban, on the other hand, went in a different direction to solve this problem, for he said that it was the old man's intention in this blessing to say that once kingship was established in Israel, it would not depart from [the tribe of] Judah and would not go to any other tribe, for even though there would be kingship in Israel [i.e. after the split of the kingdom after Solomon] Judah would still be the ruler, and the kings who ruled after David and who were from a different tribe, went against the wish of the old man [Jacob]. And it is as if the reference in his blessing is to the kings of Israel as well as to the Hasmoneans, about whom it is said: **הם המליכו ולא ממני** *They have set up kings, but not from Me (Hos 8:4)*. Our Rabbis of blessed memory said( bBB 3b): "*Anyone who says, 'I come from the house of the Hasmoneans', is a slave,*"<sup>23</sup> because they [the Hasmoneans] rebelled against the prophecy of Jacob by ruling even though they were not of the tribe of Judah. But God chose Saul [who was of the tribe of Benjamin] and appointed him king through his prophet [Samuel] because He saw that his [Saul's] kingship would not last. Therefore He appointed a king [Saul] from another tribe and not from the tribe of Judah whose kingship would be [firmly] established, as it is written: **אתן לך מלך ואקח בעברתי** *I give you a king in My anger, and take him away in My wrath (Hos 13:11)*. But from the time that Judah attained the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ramban to Gen 49:10.

royal scepter, לא יסור ממנו it would not depart from him to another tribe, and that is the meaning of what David said: ויבחר ה' אלהי ישראל בי מכל בית אבי להיות למלך על ישראל לעולם כי ביהודה בחר לנגיד ובבית יהודה בית אבי ובבני אבי בי רצה להמליך על כל ישראל And the Eternal, the God of Israel, chose me out of the entire house of my father to be king over Israel forever. For He has chosen Judah to be prince, and in the house of Judah, the house of my father, and among the sons of my father He took pleasure in me to make me king over all Israel (1 Chron 28:4). And this was the sin of the Hasmoneans in the time of the Second Temple, for which all of them had to fall by the sword of their enemies even though they were saints of the Most High, as the Master [Ramban] expounded at length.<sup>24</sup>

But it is possible to raise objections against his position, for note that the words לא יסור שבט מיהודה the scepter shall not depart from Judah (Gen 49:10) were not a command and warning to the rest of the brothers not to take away his kingship, but they were a promise and prediction. And since the kings of Israel transgressed this principle, therefore the promise of the old man was not fulfilled, except in the days of David and Solomon. And it is not appropriate to say that the old man prophesied only in reference to that short period [of history, namely the time of David and Solomon].

And Rabbenu Nissim, at the above mentioned place [his interpretation of עד כי יבא שילה], followed a different line of argument, namely, that the old man prophesied in this passage about what would come to pass in the time of Solomon, through whose sins the kingdoms would be split and the

<sup>24</sup> I.e., the Hasmoneans, being of the tribe of Levi, had no business assuming the kingship.

tribes would abandon his son Rehoboam. Therefore he promised him that in any case part of the kingdom would remain his, as it is written there: **רק את כל הממלכה לא אקרע שבט אחד אתן לבנך למען דוד עבדי ולמען ירושלים אשר בחרתי** However, I will not tear away the whole kingdom; I will give your son one tribe, for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen (1 Kgs 11:13). And indeed throughout the period of the First Temple the kings were from the tribe of Judah and the kingship did not leave their hands even though there were kings in Israel who belonged to the other tribes. And the fact that Saul was made king, does not present a problem according to the Master [Rabbenu Nissim], for the blessing of Jacob stated that after Judah's scepter would have begun to reign, it [the kingship] would not depart from him, and thus he [Rabbenu Nissim] said that the issue in connection with the Hasmoneans was not the kingship per se but the nature of their rule, for they would have been vassals of the Persian king and the Roman emperor and others. And since Israel would have no king or ruler in exile, the tribe of Judah was not promised that it would retain the kingship.

In line with this interpretation [i.e. that royal disobedience leads to the non-fulfillment of the promise] it appears better to me to explain Shiloh from the same root as we find in: **וידבר אתו בשלי** to talk to him cunningly (2 Sam 3:27; MT reads **לדבר**) and **ויכהו ... שם על השל** and (God) struck him down on the spot (2 Sam 6:7) which expresses transgression and sin, meaning that **לא יסור שבט מיהודה** the scepter shall not depart from Judah (Gen 49:10), until the sin which Solomon committed, after which the scepter of kingship which he held over all of

Israel departed from him.<sup>25</sup> But even so לֹא יִקְהַת עַמִּים the homage of peoples shall be his (Gen 49:10), that is to say that two tribes would remain with him, namely Judah and Benjamin, to whom he referred with the word 'peoples'.

And this explanation, despite the extent to which I am in sympathy with it, is not correct. For how can it be possible that the prophet [Jacob] would prophesy the removal of the kingship from the house of David because of the sin of Solomon without first mentioning that kingship would come from the tribe of Judah or in the person of David? Now, if he did not prophesy that Judah would be qualified for the kingship to begin with, how could he foretell its removal from him?

And the matter of the Hasmoneans which the Master [Rabbenu Nissim] mentioned is not the way he said it was, for they actually were kings, not vassals to the Persians and the Romans, for they cast off the yoke of the Greeks and they were not subject to the Persians. And with the Romans they actually made peace and concluded an alliance, but they were not subjugated to them.

And now that I have pondered all these various ways of interpretation, let me go back in order to discuss the underlying principle of all of them. And let me say that the two lines of interpretation of our Teachers of blessed memory [namely the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah passages] and of Ramban and Rabbenu Nissim are all one according to me, and this way of interpreting comes closer to and reflects more of the actual truth. And this is the case because our father Jacob did not explicitly mention the kingship as the commentators expounded that he would have. Therefore it is inevitable

<sup>25</sup> For the understanding of נִשְׁלִי as cunningly or treacherously, see bSanh 49a and Rashi ad loc.

that the above mentioned question arises with them. But he only spoke in reference to the sceptre, that is to say, anyone who is designated for ascendancy, leadership and rulership over the rest of his brothers, and this ascendancy, he said, would not depart from Judah. And we already found it in him before he actually was king in Israel. For already in the days of Joseph, Judah was greater than his brothers, which is why they followed his advice. The witness to this is: **ויאמר יהודה ... מה בצע** And Judah said ...what is the gain...? (Gen 37:26), **וישמעו אחיו** and his brothers listened (ibid.), **ויאמר אליו יהודה לאמר העד העיד** But Judah said to him: 'The man warned us...' etc. (Gen 43:3), **ויאמר יהודה אל ישראל** And Judah said to his father Israel, 'Send the boy in my care...' etc. (Gen 43:8), and Israel listened to his advice but he did not listen to the advice of Reuben. And similarly: **ויאמר יהודה לאחיו** (MT: **אל אחיו**) And Judah said to his brothers... (Gen 37:26), [and] **ואת יהודה ויגש אליו יהודה** Then Judah went up to him... (Gen 44:18), **שלה לפניו** He had sent Judah ahead of him (Gen 46:28). In short, Judah always took the lead among his brothers.

Also in connection with the standards it was the standard of the division of Judah **קדמה** [MT adds **מזרחתה**] which were camped on the front (Numb 2:3). And similarly, in connection with the march of the standards the text says that the standard of Judah set out first (Numb 10:8). And on the occasion of the dedication of the altar it was Nahshon the son of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah who presented the offering on the first day (cf. Numb 7:12). And when the text mentioned the names of the men<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The text refers to the heads of the ancestral houses of the Israelite tribes in Josh 14:1 but not by name or individually.

who allotted the land to Israel together with Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun, it first mentions Caleb son of Jephunneh for the tribe of Judah (cf. Josh 14:6). And in the wars of conquest God always commanded Judah to go up first (cf. Judg 1:2). And similarly in connection with the division of the land, He gave the first portion to the sons of Judah (cf. Josh 15:20). And in the days of Saul as well, when he mustered the men before setting out to save Jabesh-Gilead, the text says: ויפקדם בבוק ויהיו בני ישראל שלש **He mustered them in Bezek, and the Israelites numbered 300,000, the men of Judah 30,000** (1 Sam 11: 8), for the tribe of Judah was not counted among the rest of the tribes because of its elevated status. And he [Saul] did the same when he mustered his men to attack Amalek, for he did not number the tribe of Judah among the totality of tribes, but it was counted by itself and the rest of the tribes were counted all together. All of this teaches us that that this tribe was ascendant over its fellows. Therefore it is also said: לא יסור שבט מיהודה: **The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet** (Gen 49:10), which refers to the scribe who sits at the feet of the ruler. Or perhaps the text used מחקק to refer to all the sages who were from his tribe. And even though Saul was appointed king, the scepter and the leadership always belonged to Judah in terms of leadership and a position of honor among the rest of the tribes.

And when He gave the kingship to David and his descendants the prophecy לא יסור שבט מיהודה **the scepter shall not depart from Judah** was even further fulfilled. And when as a result of the sin of Solomon the kingdoms were divided, the prophecy לא יסור שבט מיהודה **the scepter shall not depart from Judah**, was still fulfilled, for

kingship always remained in the hands of Judah whether to a lesser or greater extent.

And also after Judah was exiled from his land to Babylon, **לא יסור** the scepter shall not depart from Judah was fulfilled, namely as our teachers of blessed memory said (bSanh 5a): "*Those are the Exilarchs in Babylon,*" for they [the rabbis] were not of the opinion [as one might deduce from this statement] that this prophecy concerned them alone, but rather that they too were included in **לא יסור** the scepter shall not depart from Judah and that this promise was also fulfilled during that period of exile.

And also in the period of the Second Temple, while the Hasmoneans ruled to fight the wars of the Lord, there was always a prince of Judah in Jerusalem, and that was the head of the Sanhedrin, in order to fulfill what is written: **לא יסור** The scepter shall not depart from Judah, and this is according to what Joseph ben Gurion wrote.<sup>27</sup>

And this is also discussed by Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan:<sup>28</sup> **לא יסור** The scepter shall not depart from Judah (Gen 49:10) refers to the Chamber of Hewn Stone [the seat of the Sanhedrin in the Jerusalem Temple] which was given within the portion of Judah. **ומחוקק מבין רגליו** nor the ruler's staff from between his feet (Gen 49:10), these are the inhabitants of Jabez who gave instruction in Israel like the great Sanhedrin which resides in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the portion of Judah, as it

<sup>27</sup> Abravanel refers to Josippon, a 10th century historical Hebrew narrative describing the period of the Second Temple. The anonymous author ascribed his work to Josephus, whom he calls Joseph ben Gurion and whose writings, together with the Apocrypha, were his main sources. See David Flusser, "Josippon," Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 10, cols. 796-798.

<sup>28</sup> An 11th century aggadist from Narbonne, whose Yesod was a collection of midrashic exegesis which was frequently quoted by Rashi.

is said: **ומשפחות סופרים יושבי יעבץ** And the families of scribes that dwelt at Jabez, etc. (1 Chron 2:55).<sup>29</sup> He meant by this that they too were included in the statement **לא יסור שבט מיהודה** The scepter shall not depart from Judah, and its meaning is that the scepter of leadership will not depart from the Chamber of Hewn Stone, and this applies as long as they lived in the land.

**nor the ruler's staff from between his feet** (Gen 49:10) is said about the Sages in the Diaspora, meaning that neither the one nor the other [i.e. political and spiritual leadership] will depart **עד שיבא שילה** until Shiloh comes. And thus the situation has been also in our own days in this long exile which includes France, and the "exiles from Jerusalem"<sup>30</sup> who are in Spain. Undoubtedly the leaders and princes which the kings and the communities appointed over the Jews were all descendants of the house of David<sup>31</sup> in order to fulfill the prophecy: **לא יסור שבט מיהודה ומחקה מבין רגליו** The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet (Gen 49:10). For the majority of exiles in those kingdoms [France and Spain] were from the tribe of Judah. Thus this promise has been fulfilled in times of prosperity and in times of exile until this day.

And they [the Rabbis] already mentioned in tractate Yoma (26a): *"Rava said: 'Torah teachers only come from the tribe of Levi or the tribe*

<sup>29</sup> See GenR 99, 8; 98, 8.

<sup>30</sup> On the use of the term "exiles from Jerusalem" to refer to the Spanish diaspora see H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Generation of the Spanish Exiles on its Fate," *Zion* 26 (1961): 23.

<sup>31</sup> Including Abravanel himself. It seems that Paul Goodman thought that Abravanel had in mind in particular his own ancestor Don Judah Abravanel who was *almoxarif mayor* or Royal Treasurer in Seville in 1310. Paul Goodman, "Introduction," in J. B. Trend and H. Loewe, *Isaac Abravanel. Six Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937): 4.

of Issachar. Why from Levi? Because it is written: יורו משפטיך ליעקב *They shall teach your laws to Jacob* (Deut 33:10). And why from Issachar? Because the text says: (ובני יששכר) יודעי בינה לעתים לדעת מה *The men of Issachar, men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times, to determine how Israel should act* (I Chron 12:33). But I say: [Torah teachers] also come from the tribe of Judah, as it is written: יהודה מחקקי *Judah my scepter* (Psalm 60:9). ”

And the phrase ומחוקק מבין רגליו *nor the ruler's staff from between his feet* (Gen 49:10) should be expounded along those lines, namely that there would never cease to be sages from the descendants of Judah.

And in reference to the phrase עד כי יבא שילה *until Shilo comes* (Gen 49: 10), I think that, even though the word עד sometimes is used for temporal delimitation, as in: ועד עולם ומעולם *from eternity to eternity* (Ps 90:2); עד אשר אבא אל אדני שעירה *until I come to my lord in Seir* (Gen 33:14); עד שיפוח היום *When the day blows gently* (Cant 2:17; 4:6), etc., at other times it occurs not to delimit time but to emphasize the matter, as in: עד כי חדל לספור *until he ceased to measure it* (Gen 41:49); עד לב השמים *(The mountain was ablaze with flames) to the very skies* (Deut 4:11); [MT has אל השמים], כי נגע עד השמים משפחה *for her punishment reaches to heaven* (Jer 51:9); עד בכור השבי *to the first-born of the captive* (Exod 12:29), and many more besides these.

And seeing that the old man [Jacob] said: לא יסור שבט מיהודה *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* (Gen 49:10) which is a promise that includes times of prosperity as well as exile, as I explained, he said: עד

until Shilo comes (Gen 49: 10), that is to say, this tribe will continue to have rulership until Shilo comes, that is the son of Judah, who is the King Messiah, and לו יקהת עמים the homage of the peoples shall be his (Gen 49: 10), that is to say, that the peoples and nations will assemble to serve him, as it is written: כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord (Zeph 3:9).

And this emphasis on the fact that this promise will last from the days of Jacob until the coming of King Messiah at the end of days is exactly what the sages intend in Bereshit Rabbah by expounding this verse in connection with the Messiah son of David. Not that they thought that the text only referred to him [the Messiah], but they thought that he too was included in the promise.

And thus all interpretations fit together, the exposition in Sanhedrin and the exposition in Bereshit Rabbah, and they are not two different interpretations as Rabbenu Nissim thought.

And they also did not interpret the phrase עד כי יבא שילה until Shilo comes (Gen 49:10) any differently from the way I explained it, which corresponds to Onkelos, who translated: "until the Messiah will come, and all peoples will gather to him."

The fourth question has been answered.

### Answer to the Fifth Question

And as for the text **אֹסְרֵי לִגְפֵן עִירָה** he tethers his young ass to a vine (Gen 49:11), he prophesied concerning the country of Judah which would be full of vineyards, flowing with wine like a spring, and full of pasture for flocks and herds, producing milk and cheese. [So fertile would his country be] that he would tether his young ass, which is the offspring of a donkey, to a vine and would eat his fill there, and on that one vine would be left enough grapes to load up his ass afterwards. Therefore it says **וּלְשׂוּרְקָה בְּנֵי אֹתוֹנוֹ** to a choice vine (ibid.), which is a newly planted vine, **אֹתוֹנוֹ** his ass's foal (ibid.).

The commentators already wrote that the *yod* in the word **אֹסְרֵי** is superfluous and likewise in the case of the *yod* of **בְּנֵי אֹתוֹנוֹ**. And the *hay* in **עִירָה** stands in place of a *vav*, its meaning being that there was so much wine that they would wash their clothes with wine instead of with water. For it was **וּבְדָם עֲנָבִים** with the blood of grapes (ibid.), which is wine, that a person would wash **סוּתָה** his robe (ibid.), that is to say 'his garment' and the wine was so abundant that he would be **חִלְלִילֵי עֵינָיִם** red-eyed (ibid.), and likewise **לִבָּן הַשִּׁנָּיִם** [MT: **לִבָּן שִׁנָּיִם**], white of teeth (ibid.), because of the abundance of milk there would be in his land.

And our sages, may their memory be for a blessing, explained these verses by identifying the vine with Israel and **וְעִירָה** his young ass with Jerusalem,<sup>32</sup> but the text does not go beyond the plain meaning.

And our Teacher Moses of blessed memory also agreed with our Father Jacob concerning the blessing of Judah, when he said: **יָדָיו רַב וְעֶזֶר תְּהִיָּה מִצָּרָיו** though his own hands strive for him, help him against

<sup>32</sup> GenR 98,9; 99,8.

his foes (Deut. 33:7), and he also said: **וְאֵל עַמּוֹ תְּבִיאֵנּוּ** and restore him to his people (ibid.), and all of this indicates that he would be chief and leader and king among his brothers and the fighter of their wars.

**זְבֻלֹן יִשְׁכֹּן לְחוּף יָמִים יָשְׁכֹן** (13) **Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore** ... (Gen 49:13) until **וַיֹּצֵא אוֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם** Then he instructed them, saying to them... (Gen 49:29).

After he explained that Judah was qualified for leadership and kingship but that his three older brothers were not, he further mentioned that also among his younger brothers there was no one who was as qualified for rulership and kingship as he [Judah] was.

And he mentioned Zebulun and Issachar before the rest of his sons, because they were born ahead of them in rank, being the sons of the mistress [of the household], Leah. Therefore he said that Zebulun, according to what he would inherit as his future portion of the land, **לְחוּף יָמִים יִשְׁכֹּן** would dwell by the seashore (Gen 49:13), and that he would be involved in trade and commerce, for that is the meaning of **לְחוּף יָמִים** by the seashore, **וּרְכָתוֹ** and his flank (ibid.), namely of his land, will reach **עַד צִידוֹן** unto Sidon (ibid.), for there he would always be engaged in trade with the Sidonians.

For it is well known that it is not suitable for a king and ruler to be a merchant, for that is a disgrace to him. And our Teacher Moses of blessed memory likewise said in his blessings: **שִׂמְחָה זְבֻלֹן בְּצֻאוֹתָיִךְ וַיִּשְׂכַּר בְּאַהֲלֶיךָ** Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, and Issachar, in your tents (Deut 33:18). Because Zebulun was plying the ocean in ships, he said concerning him **שִׂמְחָה זְבֻלֹן בְּצֻאוֹתָיִךְ** Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, meaning that he would be successful in it, and would only have

cause to rejoice. And because Issachar enjoyed rest as Jacob had said, Moses said about him: **וישכר באהליך** and Issachar, in your tents.

The rest of the verses which Moses uttered all agree with what Jacob said here. The purpose of the old man's utterance was that by nature Zebulun would be inclined to trade and that therefore the kingship was not appropriate for him, whereas Issachar was likewise unqualified for the kingship because his men would for the most part be tillers of the soil. Therefore he called him **חמור גרם רובץ בין המשפתיים** a strong-boned ass, crouching among the sheepfolds (Gen 49:14), for his feet would not dwell in his house but he would be like an ass, used as a beast of burden, **רובץ בין המשפתיים** crouching among the sheepfolds, which are the rows of the earth to be tilled and guarded. For the word **משפתיים** is an expression for 'orderly row', as in: **ה' ישפוט שלום לנו** O Lord, may you appoint well-being for us! (Isa 26:12).

**וירא מנוחה כי טוב** He saw how good rest was (Gen 49:15) that is to say, Issachar loved rest, he did not toil in wars, **נעמה** and **ואת הארץ כי נעמה** and how pleasant the country was (ibid.), **ויט שכמו לסבול** and he bent his shoulder to the burden (ibid.), as a donkey carrying a burden, **ויהי למס עובד** and he became a toiling serf (ibid.). This means that the men of Issachar would perform forced labor for the king of Israel so that they would not have to march to war. And as Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said: "*How far is this from what is fitting for a king!*"

It is also possible to interpret **וירא מנוחה כי טוב** and **ואת הארץ כי נעמה** He saw how good rest was, and how pleasant the country (ibid.), to mean that there were scholars among the men of Issachar. This is

according to the words of the sages, may their memory be for a blessing.<sup>33</sup> And that is why he [Jacob] said concerning them: **וירא מנוחה כי טוב** He saw how good rest was (ibid.), for true rest is spiritual and this is true goodness.

But there were also many of the tribe of Issachar who were tillers of the soil. Therefore he said: **ואת הארץ כי נעמה** and how pleasant the country was, **ויט שכמו לסבול** he bent his shoulder to the burden (ibid.), and such a thing is not fitting for a king.

And some say that the old man wanted to make a distinction between Zebulun who would go out to war and Issachar who did not want to fight enemies, but preferred to pay tribute to them so that they would not go out to war against him, and that this is the meaning of his being described as **בין המשפטים רובץ** crouching among the sheepfolds (Gen 49:14), which are the territories of the enemies.

After he [Jacob] finished with the sons of Leah, he shifted his attention to the sons of the handmaidens in order to prove that not one of them was as qualified for the kingship as Judah was.

Therefore he said: **דן ידין עמו כאחד שבטי ישראל** Dan shall govern his people, as one of the tribes of Israel (Gen 49:16). For in view of the fact that the king needs to be upright in his judgment and brave in his wars, he [Jacob] explained that, even though both qualities together were found in Dan, he did not possess them in a manner suitable for kingship, for although **דן ידין עמו** Dan shall govern his people, he would do that merely **כאחד שבטי ישראל** as one of the tribes of Israel and this means that he would not be qualified to judge all the tribes together, for he would

<sup>33</sup> GenR 98,12; 99,10, Midrash Tanhuma Vayechi 11 as quoted by Rashi ad loc., and bBQ 17a.

not be qualified for that.

Also in terms of military prowess undoubtedly Dan resembled [only] **נחש עלי דרך שפיפון עלי אורח** a serpent by the road, a viper by the path (Gen 49:17), and not a lion [such as Judah, cf. Gen 49:9] for he would not perform his military feats in public with the majesty of a king like Judah, but as a [lowly] footsoldier and as an armed robber who would ambush his enemies on the road and slay them. That is what the text refers to by **הנושך עקבי סוס ויפול רוכבו אחור** that bites the horse's heels so that his rider is thrown backward (ibid.). For Dan did not summon strength like Judah to fight his enemies face to face but he attacked them with trickery like someone **נושך עקבי סוס** who bites the horse's heels from behind. This is an allusion to Samson, a future member of the tribe of Dan.<sup>34</sup> It is as if the old man was saying: "I do not take pleasure in that kind of victory<sup>35</sup> but I rather **לישועתך קויתי ה'** wait for Your deliverance, O Lord (Gen 49:18), a deliverance which comes with power and honor corresponding to the sun<sup>36</sup> and not like Samson's rule as judge and his mighty acts.

And with this the fifth question has been answered.

<sup>34</sup> There are many rabbinic teachings that link Jacob's blessing of Dan with the life of Samson. Cf. GenR 98, 14 and Rashi ad loc. The most pertinent to the preceding is perhaps the comment of Lekach Tob: "The **הנושך עקבי סוס ויפול רוכבו** viper is full of rage; so was Samson full of fury against the Philistines; **נחש עלי דרך שפיפון** that bites the horse's heels so that his rider is thrown backward: so it is written: he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter (Judg 15:8)," as quoted by M. M. Kasher, Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, Vol. VI (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1965): 188.

<sup>35</sup> This refers to Israel's deliverance from the Philistines by Samson, cf. Judg 13:5 **והוא יחל להושיע את ישראל מיד פלשתים** And he shall begin to save Israel out of the hands of the Philistines, as quoted by Ramban from Lekah Tov or GenR 98,14. Perhaps cf. also Judg 15:18: **אתה נתת ביד עבדך את** הַתְּשׁוּעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת You yourself have granted this great victory through Your servant.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Judg 5:31: **כָּאֵת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּגִבְרוֹתָו** So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord! But may His friends be as the sun rising in might! in contrast to the humiliating circumstances under which Samson caused the Philistines to perish (cf. Judg 16:21–30).

### Answer to the Sixth Question.

It is possible to interpret these verses in praise of Dan [כאחד שבטי] as one of the tribes of Israel in Gen 49:16] to mean that he would be the head banner as one of the elect among the tribes of Israel. But the truth is that he would not reach the level of Judah for he [Judah] would reach the level of 'lion' and Dan the level of נחש ... הנשך עקבי סוס serpent ...that bites the horse's heel (Gen 49:17). That is why Judah traveled at the front and Dan at the rear to protect the people against the troops that followed them to try and cut off the stragglers (cf. Deut 25:18), and why the text likens him to נחש עלי דרך שפיפן עלי ארזה a serpent by the road, a viper by the path (Gen 49:17). For the serpent brings in his tail in the middle of its body [describing the way a snake coils up] [while] on the road, lest the wayfarers will cut off its tail, and it raises its head to see whether someone is coming who would harm it. Thus Dan, by being the rearguard for all the troops, protected Israel from enemies so that they would not attack its rear and, like a serpent, he would bite the enemy's horse's heels so that יפול רוכבו אחור its rider would fall backward (ibid.). Because he would travel in the rear and because the rest of the tribes would not be able to help him or rescue him when the enemy would attack them, he [Dan] always said in his battles: לישועתך קייתי ה' I wait for your salvation, O Lord (Gen 49:18), that is to say, "I do not wait for the deliverance of the tribes of Israel to deliver me, for they already traveled on ahead of me, and I alone have remained in the rear. I only wait for your deliverance, O Lord."

And in agreement with this our Teacher Moses, may peace be upon him, said about him [Dan] in his blessings: דן גור אריה יזנק מן הבשן Dan

is a lion's whelp, that leaps forth from Bashan (Deut. 33:22). For he likened him to a lion's whelp just as Judah, but in the latter part of the verse, the old man<sup>37</sup> makes an important distinction between them in the statement **יֹנֵק מִן הַבַּשָּׁן** that leaps forth from Bashan, meaning that his heroism would be tied to a particular place [i.e. Bashan], but not to any other place.

And in connection with Gad he [Jacob] said: **גַּד גִּדּוֹד יִגּוּדְנוּ** Gad shall be raided by raiders (Gen 49:19), that is to say, that enemy raiders would attack him time and again until the tribe of Gad would be exiled to Assyria before the rest of the tribes and that is what he referred to with **יִגּוּדְנוּ גִדּוֹד** he shall be raided by raiders. And when he [Jacob] said: **יִגּוֹד עֲקֵב** he shall raid at their heels (ibid.), its meaning is that when he [Gad] raids his enemies, he will be at their heels and their rear, not in front of them. This teaches his weakness which makes him unfit for the kingship.

And the old man made his use of language more elegant by saying: **יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ** You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise (Gen 49:8), **דָּן יִדִּין עַמּוֹ** Dan shall govern his people (Gen 49:16), **גַּד יִגּוּדְנוּ גִדּוֹד** Gad shall be raided by raiders (Gen 49:19), which are all word plays. It is possible to explain, furthermore, that the old man sweetened his expression by filling this verse with goodies,<sup>38</sup> one differing from the other, for he said: **גַּד גִּדּוֹד** which means that he would be the leader of a

<sup>37</sup> The reference "old man" must refer to Moses here, although elsewhere in his commentary on the Blessing of Jacob Abravanel reserved this word to refer to the Patriarch. Although Jacob was 27 years older than Moses when he died, Moses was elderly as well and certainly would have qualified for the title זקן.

<sup>38</sup> Abravanel adds his own word-play by using the word גִּדְגִּדְנִיּוֹת, "goodies, sweetmeats" to refer to the double wordplay on גַּד which occurs in the words of Jacob (גִּדּוֹד and יִגּוּדְנוּ).

troop and the head of many clans as it says: **הִישׁ מִסְפָּר לַגִּדּוּדָיו** Can his troops be numbered? (Job 25:3), for we have found no other tribe but Gad which has seven clans.

The word **יְגוּדְנוּ** (Gen 49:19) hints at the fact that they would all live united at the other side of the Jordan, and not like Menasseh whose inheritance was divided. The word **יְגוּדְנוּ** is related to the word **אֶגּוּדָה** 'troop'. He said: **וְהוּא יִגּוּד עֲקֵב** he shall raid at their heels (ibid.), and in the end this led to their exile (1 Chron 5:26).

And the meaning of the saying about Asher (Gen 49:20) is that his perfection consists only in a perfection in relation to his land, namely, in his perfection as tiller of the soil, not in authority and kingship, for he was not suitable for it. That is what the text means by: **מֵאֲשֶׁר שְׂמִנָּה לַחֲמוֹ** Asher's bread shall be rich (ibid.), that is to say that all his food products and fruits were so praiseworthy **יִתֵּן מֵעַדְנֵי מֶלֶךְ** that he would be the provider of royal dainties (ibid.) and therefore he was fit to serve the king, but not to be king himself.

The meaning of the initial *mem* of the word **מֵאֲשֶׁר** from Asher (ibid.) is that the land of Asher was not a land producing wheat but that it fattened a part of Gad's land which was called **מֵאֲשֶׁר** from Asher, that is to say, from the land of Asher, meaning that Gad would give to Asher royal dainties.

And as for Naphtali, he was a trusted servant for he would always do his best to follow the commands of his master, like **אֵילָה שְׁלָחָה** a hind let loose (Gen 49: 21), sent out with good tidings from country to country. The saying of our Master Moses, may he rest in peace, agrees with this: **וַנִּפְתְּלִי שְׂבַע רִצּוֹן** O Naphtali, sated with favor (Deut 33:23)

From Naphtali will come forth a literary class [lit. men of letters, elegance and rhetoric], which is why the text says: הַנֶּתִן אִמְרֵי שֹׁפָר who gives goodly words.(Gen 49: 21) And those qualities are fitting for royal servants, not for kings themselves.

And with this the sixth question has been answered.

### Answer to the Seventh Question

There are commentators who argue that the land of Naphtali quickly ripens its fruits and that therefore he would bring of the first fruits of all the earth, and these are what Scripture calls בכורים which is what אמרי שפר (Gen 49:21) refers to. The text mentioned Zebulun before Issachar by way of reflecting the political situation, namely, that merchants are more respected than tillers of the soil because they [merchants] have a more refined intelligence than members of all other professions in a country, whereas tillers of the soil are the most crude of all and soldiers too are more respected than tillers of the soil. Because the tribe of Zebulun was a merchant's class, the text put him before the tribe of Issachar, most of whom were tillers of the soil.

And according to our Sages of blessed memory, [the text mentions Zebulun before Issachar] because Zebulun was supporting those of the tribe of Issachar who studied Torah.<sup>39</sup>

And he mentioned Dan as the first one of the sons of the handmaidens because of his rank as the first son of Bilha, for he was born first and after that, in order to give each his due, the text mentioned Gad who was the first son of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. After that it mentioned Asher who was born after Gad, and as the last one it mentioned Naphtali the son of Bilhah to link him with the sons of her mistress Rachel, who were born last.

And thus the seventh question has been answered.

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<sup>39</sup> Midrash Tanhuma Vayehi 11; NumR 13,17.

### Answer to the Eighth Question

After he [Jacob] finished with the sons of Leah and the sons of the handmaidens, he proceeded to examine the sons of Rachel as well, starting with Joseph, as he was her first-born.

And these verses are very difficult to understand. The commentators have tried in vain to find the key to interpret them and so I [too] will give you my opinion concerning them.

And I would say that the repetition in the phrase **בן פורת יוסף** **בן פורת עלי עין** Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine (Gen 49:22) is an allusion to the two tribes that would come forth from him, Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as an allusion to two great perfections which Joseph possessed.

The first one was that he overcame his evil inclination when his master's wife asked of him: **שכבה עמי** Lie with me! (Gen 39:7). Therefore the text says: **בן פורת יוסף**, that is to say, do not think that Joseph refrained from her because he was impotent and incapable of begetting children, for he was a **בן פרה ורבה**, capable of being fruitful and multiplying, a fact of which his sons are living proof.

The second perfection was the great devotion with which he supported his father and his family. Therefore the text says: **בן פורת עלי עין** a fruitful vine by a fountain (ibid.), that is to say, This son of mine is like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1:3) which yields abundant fruit [cf. **אשר פריו יתן בעתו** that brings forth its fruit in its season, ibid.]. Thus by being in charge of provisions Joseph was as if planted near a spring of water.

And the text gets back to that first perfection by saying that **בנות צעדה עלי שור** its branches run over the wall, that is to say, every single one of the girls in town walked out to see him in his beauty. And the word **שור** might be related to **אשורנו** they have encompassed us (Ps 17:11) but probably not.

And concerning the second perfection, that of his devotion, the text said: **וימררוהו ורבו וישטמוהו בעלי חצים** Archers bitterly assailed him, shot at him and harried him (Gen 49:23), this refers to his brothers who hated him. They assailed him like archers who shoot arrows to kill the enemy, but even so **בנות צעדה עלי שור** the girls ran over the wall. **ותשב באיתן קשתו** yet his bow stayed taut (Gen 49:24), that is to say, he overcame his inclination to lie with his mistress and in spite of all the hate with which his brothers hated **וישטמוהו** and resented him (Gen 49:23), he treated them well.

And the arms of his hands were made supple (Gen 49:24), because of his devotion. This happened **מידי אביר יעקב** by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (ibid.), that is to say that Joseph's hands consisted of refined gold, and they had greater wealth than the hands of Jacob who was mighty and strong in his love for him [Joseph], for **משם** there (ibid.) he was a **רועה** shepherd (ibid.) who supported **אבן ישראל** the Stone of Israel, that is to say the House of Israel, which at that time was like a dumb stone, for there were no craftsmen among them who knew how to earn a living.

Or another interpretation [of **אבן ישראל**] is that he was the foundation stone for his entire people. For in view of the fact that one stone is the beginning of a building, the foundation of a house is called **אבן**, as in **אבן**

מאסו הבונים היתה לראש פינה The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner-stone (Ps 118:22).

It is also possible to explain מידי אביר יעקב (Gen 49:24) in reference to God, for יפוזו זרועי ידיו the arms of his hands were made supple (ibid.) because of his devotion by God, who is the Mighty One of Jacob, for on account of his [Joseph's] merit He sent him [Joseph to Egypt] before them [Jacob and his other sons].

After he praised him for these two perfections, that is to say, his mastery of his inclination and his devotion, he blessed him [in reward] for them with blessings which were related to them, that is to say: Since you supported and helped your father, may your reward come מאל אביר ועוזר from the God of your father who will help you (Gen 49:25). And since out of fear of God you suppressed your evil inclination ואת שדי ויברך the Almighty will bless you (Gen 49:25).

He added words of blessing concerning these same blessings when he said: "As reward for the fact that you provided support [may you be blessed with] ברכות שמים מטל ברכות תהום רובצת תחת blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that coucheth below (Gen 49:25),<sup>40</sup> that is to say, that his land will always be blessed<sup>41</sup> because the heavens will give it of its dew and the land will yield its produce.<sup>42</sup> Thus our teacher Moses of blessed memory said of Joseph: ממגד שמים מטל ומתהום רובצת תחת for the precious things of heaven, for the dew,

<sup>40</sup> Note that instead of מעל Abravanel reads מטל as in Deut 33:13. This is apparently a common variant in mss and versions.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. מברכת ה' ארצו Blessed of the Lord be his land (Deut 33:13).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Lev 26:4 and Deut 33:13ff.

and for the deep that coucheth beneath (Deut 33:13). As a reward for the fact that you subdued your evil inclination you will have ברכות שדים ורחם blessings of the breasts and of the womb (Gen 49:25). God will give you sons and many grandsons, the reward fitting the deed.

He [Jacob] told him also: הורי על ברכות גברו על ברכות אביך the blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of my progenitors (Gen 49:26). This is as if he said: Let this blessing of mine not be slight in your eyes, for these ברכות אביך 'blessings of your father' with which I have blessed you, are more powerful than those of my ancestors, Abraham and Isaac, who blessed their sons, for their blessings were עד תאות גבעות עולם unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills (Gen 49:26), that is to say, they dealt with abundance of crops, as in ויתן לך האלהים מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורוב דגן ותירוש May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fat places of the earth and plenty of corn and wine (Isaac's blessing of Jacob in Gen 27:28). For all of that is what is meant by תאות גבעות עולם the utmost bound of the everlasting hills (Gen 49:26) and their nature. But my ancestors did not bless their sons with abundant progeny and therefore these ברכות אביך blessings of your father (ibid.) with which I have blessed you, are more powerful than the blessings of my ancestors, for in my blessings I mentioned both material wealth and offspring while they only referred to the abundant crops but not to offspring.

And this very blessing with which I bless you, in addition to the blessings of my ancestors, will come לראש יוסף ולקדקד נזיר on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the נזיר (Gen 49: 26), the one who was set apart from אחיו his brothers (ibid.), namely Joseph.

I noticed that someone explained that the word פֹּרֶת (Gen 49:22) was used in connection with Rachel, namely that Joseph was the son of a splendid woman, the son of a woman who was splendid in the eyes of those who saw her and who surpassed [צַעֲדָהּ ibid.] all young women [בָּנוֹת ibid.] in her beauty, according to the words וַיֵּאָשְׁרוּ בָנוֹת וַיֵּאָשְׁרוּ the daughters saw her and called her happy (Cant 6:9) and [according to this exposition Jacob meant to say:] because I loved Joseph on account of his mother as he was בֶּן פֹּרֶת, that is to say the son of a splendid woman, therefore the rest of my sons וַיִּמְרְרוּהוּ וַרְבוּ have dealt bitterly with him and shot at him (Gen 49:23) with the arrows of their jealousy until they made his bitterness their target. But in spite of all this וְתִשָּׁב his bow stayed taut (Gen 49:24), he summoned his strength and overcame them in the end, וַיִּפְּוּ זְרוּעֵי יָדָיו and the arms of his hands were made supple (ibid.), that is to say, he stretched out his arms to shoot with his bow until he had overcome all בְּעֵלֵי חֲצִים archers (Gen 49:23). He was able to do this מִיָּדֵי אֲבִיר יַעֲרֵב with the help of the Mighty One of Jacob (Gen 49:24), which is God, may He be praised, for He made it happen. For מִשָּׁם רוּעָה אֲבֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל from thence, from the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel (ibid.), that is to say, because of divine Providence all matters of Israel come to pass, for if it were not for this he [Joseph] would already have been silent and dead as a stone, and thus, by virtue of all this, all the בְּרִכּוֹת שָׁמַיִם מֵעַל blessings of heaven above, etc. (Gen 49:25) will be bestowed upon the head of Joseph.

And the old man spelled all of this out to tell that Joseph was different from his brothers in character, and that they were jealous of him, and that therefore he was not as suitable for the kingship as Judah, whom

his brothers would praise and to whom his father's sons would bow down (cf. Gen 49:8). For the effectiveness of the king depends on love for him on the part of his people and his courtiers, along with divine Providence. But even though God did not want him to attain the kingship, he [Joseph] would attain other benefits as he [Jacob] mentioned [in his blessing]. Thus David said: **וימאס באוהל יוסף ... ובשבט ... הר ציון אשר אהב ... ויבחר בדוד עברו** He rejected the clan of Joseph. He did not choose the tribe of Ephraim. He did choose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which He loved, etc.... He chose David, His servant ... (Ps 78:67-70). We see that Jacob blessed Joseph as one tribe, even though he had already become two tribes. This is according to the principle that whenever the tribe of Levi would be reckoned among them [the twelve tribes], Joseph would only be counted as one tribe, for together they would only be referred to as "the twelve tribes of Yah."<sup>43</sup> Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, acted likewise in connection with his blessings. Because he was obligated to mention the tribe of Levi in connection with the priesthood, he mentioned Joseph as only one tribe when he said: **וקרני ראם** He has horns like the horns of the wild-ox ... these are the myriads of Ephraim, those are the thousands of Manasseh (Deut 33:17). But in connection with the tribal standards and the dedication of the altar and the allocation of the land, when Levi is not mentioned at all, the tribes are mentioned with two Joseph tribes.

And after Jacob had mentioned Joseph, he mentioned Benjamin to make clear that he too was not suitable for the kingship, because he was **זאב**

<sup>43</sup> The only reference to the tribes of Yah occurs in Ps 122:4.

יטרוף [MT: יטרף] a ravenous wolf (Gen 49:27), who did not follow the law as is fitting for a king. For בבקר יאכל עד In the morning he consumes the booty (ibid.), which he despoiled and likewise in the evening, so that evening and morning יחלק שלל he divides the spoil (ibid.). And even though this spoil was taken from the enemies, he [Jacob] does not praise him for this, because it is not fitting for a warrior to use his strength to obtain booty, for this falls under the rubric of covetousness, which is not considered honorable. Therefore he [Benjamin] was unworthy of the kingship. The old man [Jacob] was referring to Saul [who was a Benjaminite] with this statement, for of him it is said in connection with the Wars against Amalek: ותעט אל השלל ותעט הרע בעיני ה' (why) ... did you swoop down on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord? (1 Sam 15:19).

But since Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, blessed the tribes according to their portion in the chosen land, he said of Benjamin, as the Holy Temple was part of his portion: ידיד ה' ישכן לבטח The beloved of the Lord, he rests securely ... (Deut 33:12).<sup>44</sup>

And after Scripture had finished recounting the words of the old man in matters concerning his sons, it says: כל אלה שבטי ישראל שנים עשר All these are the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 49:28), that is to say, although he praised the deeds of some and censured the deeds of others, they were all tribes of Israel, [all of them] tribes coming from the same honorable stock. They were all perfect in their deeds<sup>45</sup> and therefore

<sup>44</sup> It is not entirely clear from this passage whether Abravanel understands ידיד to refer to the land or to the tribe of Benjamin. But his lengthier remarks on Deut 33:12 seem to point to the latter.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Midrash Tehilim 1: All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. In this vein Scripture writes: None has beheld iniquity in Jacob (Numb 23:21). Why did Balaam mention Jacob, and not

Scripture called them שבטים ['tribes' or 'main branches']. For the text compared Jacob and his sons to a tree whose roots are one but from which many branches branch out. The main branch is called שבת 'trunk' and every main branch branches out into smaller branches called פארות, which are the family units, and each small branch branches out into a number of leaves, which are the individual family members. And just as it is the nature of a tree that when the root is good, all the small and large branches and the leaves which grow from it are good—so Jacob, who was likened to the root was whole and good and his sons were straight and good main branches (שבטים).

וזאת אשר דבר להם אביהם ויברך אותם **And this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them** (Gen 49: 28) to indicate that these were the prophecies and the utterances which their father spoke to them, but that he blessed them as well. This blessing to every single one of them was germane to each one. Just as you could say that after he mentioned the incident of Reuben and his individual blessing, he blessed him [here] in order that the Holy Blessed One would wipe out his sin and take care of his sons, so too in reference to every one of the others there was a special blessing in connection with what he had said to him. The meaning of **איש אשר כברכתו ברך אותו every one according to his blessing he blessed them** (ibid.), is that he pronounced his blessing, meaning that the text refers here to what his father had said to him earlier. The blessing which was pronounced afterwards was connected to this [earlier pronouncement].

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Abraham and Isaac? Because he saw that dross had issued from Abraham—Ishmael and all the sons of Keturah; he also saw that Esau and his clans had issued from Isaac. But all Jacob's progeny was holy, as it says: All these are the twelve tribes of Israel. So it is written: You are all fair, my love; and there is no blemish in you (Cant 4:7).

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra explained<sup>46</sup> אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּבְרַכְתּוּ בִּרְךְ אוֹתוֹ to mean that it was in accordance with God's will that their father blessed each one of them,<sup>47</sup> for the words of God and His blessings were in his mouth.

And thus the eighth question has been answered.

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<sup>46</sup> This explanation of Ibn Ezra is not preserved in the version of his commentary that is included in the standard editions of Miqra'ot Gedolot.

<sup>47</sup> I understand Abravanel's use of אביו, 'his father' instead of אביהם 'their father' to reflect the notion which is implicit in the biblical verse, namely that each one was individually blessed by his father.

### Chapter Three: Abravanel's Views on Kingship and Political Leadership

Isaac Abravanel's interest in political theory was rare in medieval Jewish thought. According to many, Abravanel's interest in and discussion of actual political conditions stands out as an exception.<sup>1</sup> The discussions by Jewish philosophers of his era were limited to the concept of the ideal state and were influenced by the thought of Alfarabi and Maimonides.<sup>2</sup> It remains to be seen whether Abravanel's discussions of contemporary forms of government reflect more than practical illustrations of his religio-philosophical views.<sup>3</sup> The fact that he did not devote a separate treatise to his political theories but limited himself to lengthy discussions within the context of his biblical exegesis, may indicate that general political theory was not his primary interest.

Nevertheless, Abravanel's republican position stands out as striking, especially in view of the strong monarchical tradition in Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the talmudic and medieval period Jews had received constant

<sup>1</sup> Ephraim E. Urbach, "Die Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abrabanel," Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums 81 (1937): 257.

<sup>2</sup> Baer, "Problems of History and Politics," 241; J. Guttman, Philosophies of Judaism (Philadelphia: 1964/New York: 1973): 289; Urbach, "Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abrabanel," 257.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Reines considered Abravanel's views on government to "reflect the deepest principles of his religious philosophy." See his Maimonides and Abravanel on Prophecy (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970): lxvi.

<sup>4</sup> L. Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," 88.

reinforcement of the idea that the institution of monarchy was legitimate through the vehicles of their liturgy and religious thought, which presented God as king and made the restoration of the Davidic dynasty the subject of daily petitionary prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Abravanel's political views were influenced by his philosophical outlook, his knowledge and analysis of ancient history, the political structures of his day and his commitment to Torah as the divine guide for his people. He saw the political state as a necessity in view of the human imperfection which was caused by the sin of Adam.<sup>6</sup> This view is especially apparent in his comments on the first eleven chapters of Genesis where it is applied to the development of human civilization in general and of the city in particular. There he argued that the natural order which was instituted by God did not include urban life with its imposed government and private property. Abravanel considered these aspects of life 'artificial' and a result of human sin and rebellion.<sup>7</sup> They were conceded by God, not instituted. And so is the case with particular forms of government such as the monarchy, as he argues in his comments to Gen 11:1: "... and it is with the political and urban life as with the king."<sup>8</sup> Therefore no form of human government could be considered perfect, for the ideal political order could only be a

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. I. Rabinowitz, "Kings. Kingship," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971): 10.1021.

<sup>6</sup> According to Baer the criticism of civilization as artificial and evil as opposed to nature as good and wholesome, is a notion which Abravanel adopted from the writings of Seneca. Cf. Baer, "Problems of History and Politics," 248-253.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 253-254; L. Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in J. B. Trend and H. Loewe, eds., *Isaac Abravanel. Six Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937): 110.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 111.

theocracy. However, "outside of Eden, limited monarchies are necessary,"<sup>9</sup> and thus under certain circumstances kingship was deemed acceptable by him. For ancient Israel such legitimate monarchic government was predicated on the existence of a superior court, the Sanhedrin, that promulgated laws and elected municipal lower courts that enforced local laws.

Abravanel's evaluations of the institution of kingship and his theories on the ideal form of government are found throughout his Bible commentaries,<sup>10</sup> but his most extensive statements occur in his commentaries to Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8.<sup>11</sup> The lengthy essays on the institution of kingship which Abravanel offered in his commentaries on these biblical chapters have been discussed and partially translated by Yitzhak Baer,<sup>12</sup> L. Strauss,<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Urbach,<sup>14</sup> B. Netanyahu,<sup>15</sup> Alvin Jay Reines,<sup>16</sup> Marianne

<sup>9</sup> A. J. Reines, "Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971): 2.108.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Abravanel on Genesis 1-11 (see H.-G. v. Mutius, *Der Kainiterstammbaum Genesis 4/17-24 in der jüdischen und christlichen Exegese* [Judaistische Texte und Studien; Hildesheim/New York: Georg Olms, 1978]: 146-167); Exod 18:13, 24; Deut 1:9, 13, 15; 16:18, 17:14; Josh 10:12, Judg 4:9, Judges 9 (the Fable of Jotham), 1 Sam 8:4, 15:11; 2 Sam 10:13-23, 12:12-15, 18-21; 1 Kgs 2:37, 3:5, 8:15, 13:2; Hos 13:11 (see Urbach, "Staatsauffassung," 263 and Gregorio Ruiz, *Don Isaac Abrabanel y su Comentario al Libro de Amos* [Madrid: Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid, 1984]: xciv note 223) and Am 5:26 (see Ruiz, *ibid.*, 149-150).

<sup>11</sup> Abravanel's comments on Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8 are to a large extent similar in nature. His treatment of the issue of kingship in his *Commentary on Deuteronomy* is a shorter version of that found in his *Commentary to 1 Samuel*. Although he started the writing of his *Commentary on Deuteronomy* already in Lisbon, he lost the manuscript as a result of his flight from Portugal. By the time it reached his possession again (after 1495 when he lived in Korfu) he had already written his *Commentary on Samuel* (completed in 1483). He then revised his *Commentary on Deuteronomy* in accordance with his subsequently written commentaries and explicitly referred to his *Commentary on Samuel*. See Urbach, "Staatsauffassung," 258, note 5. Strauss pointed out that Abravanel's comments on Deuteronomy 17 are a further development of his views on the government of ancient Israel as expressed in his comments on Deut 16:18ff. See Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 111-112, note 3.

<sup>12</sup> Baer, "Problems of History and Politics," 254-255.

<sup>13</sup> Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 93-129.

<sup>14</sup> Urbach, "Staatsauffassung," 257-270.

<sup>15</sup> Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 173-180.

Awerbuch,<sup>17</sup> and Solomon Gaon.<sup>18</sup>

The two biblical passages in question, Deut 17:14-20 and 1 Samuel 8, seem to contradict each other, the first one legislating for the appointment of a king after the conquest of the land, the second one containing a divine and prophetic condemnation of the people's request for a king. The question that Abravanel sought to address in his exegesis of these two passages is whether the institution of kingship is indeed a divine commandment or, as the Samuel passage seems to suggest, a human sin.

While the solutions to this quandary offered by previous Jewish as well as Christian exegetes differed considerably from each other, Abravanel characterized them all as variations of the view that Israel sinned only in the manner in which they asked for a king, but not in the fact that they asked for one.<sup>19</sup> Implicit in such an interpretation is the notion that monarchy is intrinsically good, for God would not have commanded His people to institute any but the best form of government possible.<sup>20</sup> This was a position with which Abravanel disagreed. Therefore his own interpretation of Deut. 17:14-15 was that "the above mentioned verses do not express a commandment to appoint a king but merely allow [for it] in view of the evil inclination of people," which was not only in contradiction with the

<sup>16</sup> Reines, Maimonides and Abravanel, lxvi-lxvii.

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Awerbuch, Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft. Geschichtsdeutung der Juden in Spanien vor der Vertreibung am Beispiel Abravanel's und Ibn Vergas (Studien zu jüdischem Volk und christlicher Gemeinde, Band 6; Berlin: Selbstverlag Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1985): 38-47.

<sup>18</sup> Gaon, Influence of Alfonso Tostado, 97-106.

<sup>19</sup> Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 112; Gaon, Influence of Alfonso Tostado, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 112.

medieval exegetical tradition on this issue,<sup>21</sup> but also with classic rabbinic thought.<sup>22</sup> For as Abravanel pointed out himself, the Talmud interpreted Deut 17:14–15 clearly as a divine command when it stated: “The Israelites were commanded three things upon their entry into the Land: To elect a king, to destroy the seed of Amalek, and to build the Temple.”<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems that Abravanel was convinced of the fact that his interpretation of these biblical passages was the correct one and he sought to bolster his position with mostly historical arguments. Thus he argued that, if the appointment of a king would indeed have been a divine commandment, one would have expected that both Joshua and the Judges already would have complied with this command in their days.<sup>24</sup>

Once Abravanel had established that the Torah does consider the institution of kingship divinely ordained, he continued with a theoretical discussion of the advantages of kingship for society in general and for ancient Israelite society in particular.

<sup>21</sup> The view that Deut 17:14–15 contains a divine command to institute a king in Israel, was held by Maimonides, Nahmanides, Moses of Coucy, Gersonides and Bahya ben Asher. Cf. Strauss, “Abravanel’s Political Teaching,” 119 and note 1. Strauss pointed out that of all medieval Jewish commentators only Ibn Ezra understood the Deuteronomy passage to contain a permission rather than a command to choose a king (*ibid.*). Although Abravanel did not cite Ibn Ezra as support for his own views, it is likely that he knew Ibn Ezra’s exegesis as he quotes him on other occasions. Strauss also argued that Abravanel was influenced by Christian interpretations of Deuteronomy 17, in particular the Vulgate translation and the exegesis of Nicholas of Lyra, both of which understand the Deuteronomy passage to permit and regulate but not demand the institution of the monarchy (*ibid.*, 121–121 and note 1).

<sup>22</sup> A view similar to that of Abravanel was expressed by Josephus, who characterized the legislation for kingship in Deut 17:5 as hypothetical. See *Antiq. I* 269 par. 223 as quoted by Urbach, “Staatsauffassung,” 264 note 22.

<sup>23</sup> *bSanh* 82:72 on Cohen Gadol as quoted by Abravanel in his second exegetical question to 1 Sam 8 (Jer. ed. p. 200). Cf. also Gaon, *Influence of Alfonso Tostado*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Urbach, “Staatsauffassung,” 258 and note 6. It has been suggested that Abravanel may also have been influenced by Christian interpretations, notably those of Nicholas of Lyra and Alfonso Tostado on Deut 17:14–15, who both argued that the institution of a king was not a command but a permission (*permissio*). Cf. Strauss, “Abravanel’s Political Teaching,” 95ff. and Gaon, *Influence of Alfonso Tostado*, 100.

He began his discussion by pointing out that the philosophers compared the relationship of the king to his realm as that of the heart to the body.<sup>25</sup> The philosophers saw monarchic government as necessary to fulfill the three main conditions of effective government: one-man rule, dynastic continuity and absolute power. Abravanel, on the other hand, rejected the monarchy as an ideal form of government, and did not consider it essential to the proper functioning of a state. He did see much more merit in a government by many, such as a council of governors, with limited terms of office for the individuals involved and a body of law regulating their government. Abravanel stressed that rulers are to be held accountable for their actions, as they are only human and thus fallible.

Rather than providing a logical argument for his position, Abravanel supported it with historical examples. Thus he argued that the history of Rome had shown that accountable government is more effective than autocracy. The Roman republic became a world power which subsequently declined under the rule of its emperors.<sup>26</sup> Abravanel then pointed out that in his own time the flourishing republics of Venice,<sup>27</sup> Florence<sup>28</sup> and Genoa were governed by a Council of Governors, which is much to be

<sup>25</sup>Urbach, "Staatsauffassung," 260 and note 10; Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 112 and note 4.

<sup>26</sup> Urbach pointed out that Abravanel referred to ancient Roman history elsewhere in his work. See for example his comments on the Fable of Jotham (Judges 9) where he mentioned the coronation of Octavian. "Staatsauffassung," 261 note 13.

<sup>27</sup> Baer pointed out that from all political systems of his time known to Abravanel, Venice came closest to his political ideal. Cf. Abravanel's commentary on Exod 18:13-27 and Baer, "Problems of History and Politics," 256.

<sup>28</sup> According to Urbach, Abravanel's conception of Florence as a state governed by a Council of Governors reflects the ideal presented in the works of contemporary Florentine historians rather than the reality of the reign of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who exercised royal power, even though he did not have the title of 'king'. Ibid., 261, note 14.

preferred over the rule of kings who, according to Abravanel, do not experience opposition, and are not forced to correct their mistakes. Thus the warfare and justice practiced by kings serve those kings themselves, and not their subjects (Commentary to 1 Samuel 8). Abravanel's own lifetime experiences had taught him that this is a dangerous situation. In his comments on Deuteronomy 17 he wrote: "Look at the lands whose rule is in the hands of kings, and you will see their abominations and horrible deeds. Each of them does what is good in his eyes, for the land is full of oppression before them."<sup>29</sup> In comparison, the political government of the Italian city-states must have seemed a viable option, even to a man who considered the development of cities as such the result of human evil tendencies. In short, Abravanel's judgement of the institution of kingship in general was that it was a negative form of government.

Abravanel's evaluation of the institution of kingship in Israel was that it was irreconcilable with the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel. For the three main tasks expected of a king in respect to his people, namely, delivering them from enemies through warfare, legislating, and exercising extraordinary power to punish, were in Israel's case undertaken by God. God gave Israel's judges the assignment of warfare. God legislated for Israel through His giving of the Torah. God delegated the extraordinary power to punish to the Sanhedrin. Thus, according to Abravanel, Israel did not need a human king. In fact, its human kings had more often than not led the people astray, while Israel's true God-fearing leaders had been the prophets and judges (Commentary to 1 Samuel 8).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Gaon, *Influence of Alfonso Tostado*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 117-118.

Abravanel was aware of the fact that the biblical course of events as described in the first book of Samuel considerably weakened his negative evaluation of kingship. For if God is truly Israel's king, then why would God have instructed Samuel to give in to the people's demand for a human king? In order to respond to this question Abravanel argued that the existence of kingship in Israel reflected neither divine commandment nor Israel's willful sin, but simply its human weakness and evil inclination. Therefore, the passage in Deut 17:14-20 does not contain a divine commandment to Israel to appoint a king but provides legislation in anticipation of the inevitable request for a king by a people that wants to be like all other nations. Thus, in spite of his misgivings, Samuel reluctantly gave in to the people, only making sure that the conditions for kingship set forth in the Book of Deuteronomy were met. According to Abravanel, Samuel also made clear to the Israelites that although God would always remain their true king, God would not be jealous of any human king. Israel's human king would not in any way be God's rival but rather God's earthly representative. That this would be so, would be expressed through Israel's two royal election mechanisms: (1) The king needed to be chosen and anointed by a prophet, and (2) The king needed to be confirmed by the people. The Israelite monarchy was therefore a concession to a people that was unable to accept a pure theocracy.

But Abravanel did not consider the monarchy as such second best to theocracy. Although he conceded that the ideal human government, at least as far as Israel is concerned always would contain a monarchic element, he preferred the rule of judges over that of kings.<sup>31</sup> In his comments on 1

<sup>31</sup> Gaon, *Influence of Alfonso Tostado*, 102.

Kings 1 Abravanel called the prophet Moses "the first king that reigned in Israel," and in his Commentary on Deuteronomy he stated that "All this [the arguments which he brought against the monarchy], shows that the rule of judges is good and the rule of kings is bad, harmful, and dangerous."<sup>32</sup>

For it was during the period of the Judges that ancient Israel came closest to what for Abravanel was the ideal state, as close as was possible for humankind after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.<sup>33</sup>

One of the biblical texts which allowed Abravanel to expound at length on his theory of ideal political leadership was Deut 16:18.<sup>34</sup> The text reads as follows: "You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice." According to Abravanel this verse stressed two things, namely, that the appointment of local judges in Israel was not a royal prerogative and that this biblical injunction applied not only to the period of the conquest of the land but to all periods of Israel's history.

In great detail he sketched the particulars of this ideal combination of human and divine rulership in Israel. His conception of such a twofold rulership seems to have been influenced by the Christian distinction between spiritual and temporal authority.<sup>35</sup> The spiritual government of Israel was in the hands of the prophet-king, the priests and the Levites. The ideal structure of Israel's human government was a mixed government consisting

<sup>32</sup> Abravanel's Commentary to Deut 17:14-15 as quoted by Gaon, *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Baer, "Problems of History and Politics," 256.

<sup>34</sup> Awerbuch, Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Strauss, "Abravanel's Political Teaching," 124.

of a monarchic element, the king, an aristocratic element, the Sanhedrin, and a democratic element, the local judges.<sup>36</sup>

But from his comments on Deuteronomy 16 it becomes clear that for Abravanel the crucial element of Israel's ideal government was the Sanhedrin, of which the majority of its members were elected from the priests and Levites, who were exempt from the burdens of making a living and who could devote themselves full-time to the study of Torah. In other words, the members of the Sanhedrin belonged to Israel's aristocracy. In this system the king was not an absolute ruler but a *primus inter pares*.<sup>37</sup>

In the following chapter we will see that Abravanel considered himself part of Israel's aristocracy. He also claimed descent from the house of David and from the princes of Judah who headed the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> In his exegesis of Genesis 49 and 1 Samuel 9 Abravanel addressed the question of whether the house of Judah had been divinely preordained to provide Israel's king, a notion commonly understood from Jacob's blessing of Judah in Gen 49:10: **לא יסור שבט מיהודה ומחקק מבין רגליו** The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, but seemingly contradicted by the biblical course of events in which Samuel anoints the Benjaminite Saul as Israel's first king.

Abravanel argued that the rulership which the patriarch Jacob referred to

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 125. In his comments to Deuteronomy 16 Abravanel pointed out that Israel judges were appointed by the people itself in contrast to other kingdoms like Castile, Aragon and Naples where the appointment of judges was the sole prerogative of the king. Abravanel did not consider Israel to be unique in this respect, for he mentioned some principalities in Spain as well as England as further examples of states where the common people have the right to choose their own judges.

<sup>37</sup> Awerbuch, *Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> See above, Chapter Two, 41.

was not kingship but leadership in general.<sup>39</sup>

Being a influential and learned Jewish leader, Abravanel must have applied the injunction of Deut 16:18 directly to himself. Undoubtedly he believed that through him Israel's ideal government continued to be realized.

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<sup>39</sup> See above Chapter Two, 39. In his commentary on 1 Samuel 9 Abravanel remarked that the long rule of the Davidic dynasty should not be considered a reflection of the election of the tribe of Judah to monarchic rule but rather a reward for the merit of David.

#### **Chapter Four: The Leadership Theme in Abravanel's Commentary on the Blessing of Jacob**

In his interpretation of the Blessing of Jacob in Gen 49: 1–28, Abravanel followed the many rabbinic interpretations of this passage according to which the Patriarch's prophetic blessings foretold the "great events" in the tribes' future history. The innovation he contributed and the brilliance of his exegesis consisted in the fact that he utilized a wide variety of rabbinic and later interpretations of these verses and wove them all together into an elucidation of what he saw as the central theme of Jacob's blessing, namely, the theme of leadership. In spite of the variety of viewpoints which he discussed at length, Abravanel skillfully managed to narrow his exegetical focus to a detailed evaluation of each of Jacob's sons in terms of their leadership potential and their qualifications for kingship. He expressed that focus most clearly in his Answer to the Second Question:

I am, however, inclined to the opinion that the intention of these statements and blessings is that, at his death, Jacob wanted to explain from which one of his sons the scepter of royalty and the dominion over his seed would go forth, for he saw and knew the power of his prophecies, that his seed would increase greatly and that it would befit them to appoint a leader or king as executive officer and ruler, and in order that no dispute would arise among them concerning the

appointment of a king, at the hour of his death the old man saw fit to clarify from which of their tribes the leadership and kingship would come, and through that tribe kings would rule. And on account of this he thoroughly investigated each one of his sons according to their character and qualities to see who would be worthy of the kingship.<sup>1</sup>”

According to Abravanel, Jacob’s assessment of his sons’ leadership potential would justify the fact that only one of them would merit to provide future leadership for his people. And so one by one the sons of Jacob were evaluated.

Reuben’s status as first-born did not automatically qualify him for leadership. The ‘fickle-mindedness’ which was one of his character traits was also exhibited by his descendants in their support of the rebels Dathan and Abiram and in their reckless choice of the region at the other side of the Jordan as their inheritance.

The unsuitability of Simeon and Levi for leadership was obvious. Their violent nature was evident from the incident of the massacre of the men of Shechem in which they killed indiscriminately for gain and not for revenge, as well as from later Israelite history, notably the Baal Peor incident where the sinners were identified as Simeonites and in the rebellion of Korach whose associates were said to be Levites. Thus neither tribe could qualify for kingship, for a king should rule according to law and justice rather than with lawlessness. Of interest is Abravanel’s claim that the dispersion of their descendants among the rest of the tribes constituted

<sup>1</sup> See above, Chapter Two, 19.

an additional reason for disqualification from rulership.

Judah, on the other hand, was fit for rulership for the following four reasons: (1) his eminence was accepted by his brothers; (2) he was successful in warfare; (3) he exercised restraint and rejected lawless violence as in the incident with Joseph; (4) he had the power of a lion. It is in connection with Judah that Abravanel clarified his understanding of the kind of leadership which Jacob was referring to. In doing so he sought to solve the many questions which interpreters of Jacob's blessing had raised in connection with the kingship promised to Judah. As Abravanel put it in his Fourth Question: Since there have been many kings in Israel who were not from the house of Judah and since kingship has long ceased, how should the prophecy "The scepter shall not depart from Judah" (Gen 49:10) be understood? In response Abravanel suggested that the words 'scepter' and 'ruler's staff' refer to a variety of leadership roles, including judicial, legislative, royal, military, administrative, communal and intellectual leadership. Thus Jacob did not speak about kingship per se but about a broad category of leadership:

... our father Jacob did not explicitly mention the kingship as the commentators expounded that he would have. Therefore it is inevitable that the above mentioned question arises with them. But he only spoke in reference to the sceptre, that is to say, anyone who is designated for ascendancy, leadership and rulership over the rest of his brothers, and this ascendancy, he said, would not depart from Judah.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See above, Chapter Two, 38-39.

According to Abravanel, the exercising of that kind of leadership would be expressed through the royal rule of David and Solomon and the subsequent kings of the house of David, as well as through the government of the Jewish leaders in Babylon, of the head of the Sanhedrin, known as Prince of Judah, in Jerusalem, during the Second Temple Period, and of the Jewish sages in the Diaspora. He firmly believed that that same leadership was still fulfilled by Jewish nobles like himself, and that this was the case even in the difficult times following the Expulsion from Spain:

Undoubtedly the leaders and princes which the kings and the communities appointed over the Jews were all descendants of the house of David ... in order to fulfill the prophecy: **לֹא יִסּוּר שִׁבְטִי מִיְּהוּדָה וּמַחֲקֶק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו** **The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet** (Gen 49:10). For the majority of exiles in those kingdoms [France and Spain] were from the tribe of Judah. Thus this promise has been fulfilled in times of prosperity and in times of exile until this day.<sup>3</sup>

That merchants would not qualify for such leadership, is evident from Abravanel's assertion that Zebulun's involvement in trade and commerce was not deemed suitable for a king, although his support of Torah scholars was praiseworthy.

As a tiller of the soil, Issachar was certainly disqualified for

<sup>3</sup> See above, Chapter Two, 42.

high office, and his unsuitability was further highlighted by his willingness to serve the king by performing forced labor rather than military service. The fact that there were scholars among the tribe of Issachar could not change its basic lack of leadership qualities.

Although Dan was upright in judgement and brave in warfare, he too did not have the leadership skills required to be able to lead all tribes. For his military accomplishments consisted in successful ambushes of the enemy, while he lacked, the majesty and honor of the kind of open confrontation of the enemy which would be the expected behavior of a king.

Gad, too, was disqualified from leadership on the basis of his military tactics, for he would attack his enemies from the rear.

Asher's claim to fame was his successful agricultural production. Though this qualified him to be a royal purveyor, it would not bring him royalty.

Naphtali was a trusted and well-educated royal servant, which made him a follower and not a leader.

Joseph's two great perfections were his self-discipline, which was comparable to the restraint exercised by Judah, and his devotion to family. Yet he, too, was not qualified for the kingship because his brothers were jealous of him, implying that a king who does not have the support and devotion of his people and courtiers cannot be successful.

The last son to be dismissed as a future leader of his people was Benjamin, whose looting of enemy booty revealed two characteristics unworthy of a king: disregard of the law and greed.

In summary, through his exegesis of Genesis 49, Abravanel

identified the following disqualifications for leadership: recklessness (Reuben), lawlessness (Simeon and Levi, Benjamin), preoccupation with commerce (Zebulun), lowly status or occupation (Issachar), unwillingness to serve in the military (Issachar), a predilection for indirect rather than open confrontation (Dan and Gad), a servant mentality (Asher and Naphtali) and greed (Benjamin). Meritry qualities which do not constitute leadership skills in and of themselves, but which would reflect well on any leaders who possessed them, would be support of scholarship (Zebulun), engagement in scholarship (Issachar), courage (Dan), commitment to quality (Asher), loyalty and education (Naphtali), and devotion to family (Joseph).

Finally and most importantly, according to Abravanel's exegesis of Judah's blessing, a successful leader is first of all someone whose leadership, whether it is in the judicial, legislative, royal, military, administrative, communal or intellectual realm, is accepted by his people. In addition to this, Abravanel sees a leader as someone who confronts his enemies openly, successfully and courageously, who exercises restraint, who opposes lawless violence, and who has power.

It is quite clear that Abravanel's discussion of leadership in this part of his Torah commentary is not meant to be an evaluation of the monarchy as such or of the monarchy as it functioned in ancient Israel. For he had already engaged in such a discussion in great detail in his early Commentary on the Book of Joshua and in his Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy which he had completed in 1496. There his evaluation had been negative, while in his comments to Genesis 49 kingship was understood as leadership and seen in a positive light.

Nor do I consider it likely that at his late stage in his life—his Commentary to Genesis and Exodus was published in 1505—Abravanel felt the need to evaluate the monarchs of his time, and especially the ones he had served personally, by comparing them to the ideal ruler which he presented in the person of Judah in his comments on Genesis 49. But it does seem plausible to posit that in painting his picture of the ideal Jewish ruler, Abravanel must have drawn partly upon personal observation of his former royal employers.

Following the traditions of his family, Abravanel had spent most of his professional life in the service of kings and he had described his personal experiences with them in several of his exegetical works.

These auto-biographical statements tend to contain mostly positive or neutral evaluations of the European monarchs he had served. They seem to be in contradiction to Abravanel's passionate rejection of the monarchy as expressed most elaborately in his Commentaries on 1 Samuel 8: and Deuteronomy 17. Scholars have wondered at his cautious approach and some have attributed it to purely political expedience on Abravanel's part.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Abravanel described his first royal employer, Alfonso V of Portugal, in favorable terms in his Introduction to his Commentary on the Book of Joshua. Referring to Alfonso as "just and righteous, vigorous and heroic, ardently seeking his people's welfare, learned and wise in the councils of leadership,"<sup>5</sup> Abravanel described him as

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Barzilay, Between Reason and Faith, 131.

<sup>5</sup> Introduction to Commentary to Joshua as quoted by Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 20.

the ideal king. This is perhaps not so surprising in light of the positive experiences which he, his family and the entire Jewish community in Portugal had enjoyed under Alfonso's rule. Netanyahu remarked that this king's broad-mindedness and tolerance were indeed a rare phenomenon in the Middle Ages,<sup>6</sup> so that Abravanel's glowing description seems to have been justified.

But Alfonso's successor, Joao II, accused Abravanel of treason and he was forced to flee the country. In various of his works Abravanel gave voice to his complaints about his personal misfortune, accusing Joao II of being "a greedy and avaricious person who would take a man's life to satisfy his ambition for robbery" (Introduction to the Commentary on Joshua), "a deceitful and iniquitous person" (Commentary on II Samuel, end) and "a tyrannical and avaricious king" (Introduction to his Passover Sacrifice).<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have been particularly puzzled by the seeming restraint with which Abravanel referred to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Spanish monarchs who were responsible for the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.<sup>8</sup> Abravanel described his life in Spain and his dealings with the Catholic monarchs in the Introductions to his Commentary on Kings, his Commentary on Deuteronomy, and his

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 272 note 76. Awerbuch's conclusion that Abravanel did not condemn the character of this king but limited himself to portraying him as a victim of evil influences, appears to be based exclusively on a reading of the Introduction to the Commentary on Joshua and is, therefore, not accurate. Cf. Awerbuch, Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft, 41 and note 5. In the *editio princeps* of the uncensored Sabbionetta edition of Abravanel's Introduction to the Commentary on Deuteronomy there is a reference to king Joao's attempt to kill him in his anger. Cf. S. Z. Leiman, "Abravanel and the Censor," Journal of Jewish Studies 19 (1968): 54.

<sup>8</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 49 and 277 note 34, 185-186 and 312 note 163; Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," 89; Awerbuch, Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft, 41.

treatises Passover Sacrifice and *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah*. Granted that Abravanel was most likely misled by the shrewd Ferdinand and that he too had shared in the false sense of security that Spanish Jewry felt on the eve of the Expulsion,<sup>9</sup> it is a disturbing thought that he would have pronounced no judgement on the monarchs who were responsible for the tragedy that his people had suffered, but would have restricted himself to a description of the historical events and an explanation of their motives.<sup>10</sup> But this is exactly what he seems to have done in the Introduction to his Commentary on Kings.<sup>11</sup> And it is also true that in the Introduction to *Ma'ayane Yeshu'a* Abravanel described at length the suffering of the Jews as a result of their expulsion from Spain but stopped short from condemning the actions of the Spanish monarchs.<sup>12</sup>

Scholarly research, however, has shown convincingly that many editions of Abravanel's work have been subject to censorship, and that there is at least one passage in Abravanel's writings where he expressed his hatred of Ferdinand without restraint.<sup>13</sup> For it is in the uncensored 1551 Sabbionetta edition of his Commentary on Deuteronomy that he refers to Ferdinand as אשמדי ראש המחבלים מלך עריץ "Ashmodai, chief of demons, a violent king."<sup>14</sup> Thus we

<sup>9</sup> Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 45. In the Introduction to his Commentary on Deuteronomy Abravanel writes of the last decade before the Expulsion: אחריו בן עשר שנים וישכון ישראל בטח בכל ארצות. Ibid., 276 note 27.

<sup>10</sup> So Awerbuch, *Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> A recent translation has been offered by Jean-Christophe Attias, in his *Isaac Abravanel. La mémoire et l'espérance* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992): 59–65.

<sup>12</sup> Awerbuch, *Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft*, 41 and note 18.

<sup>13</sup> Leiman, "Abravanel and the Censor," 49–61, and esp. 53; Lawee, "Inheritance of the Fathers," 4.

<sup>14</sup> Leiman, "Abravanel and the Censor," 54; Attias, *Isaac Abravanel*, 69 and note 32.

are justified in questioning the authenticity of the neutral descriptions of Ferdinand elsewhere in Abravanel's works.

His last royal employers were the kings of Napels, Ferdinand and his successor Alfonso, whom he praised as מלכי חסד, merciful kings.<sup>15</sup>

In general, I would agree with Netanyahu and Awerbuch that the evaluation of Abravanel's royal employers does not seem to reflect more than their attitude towards Abravanel or their Jewish subjects, and should not be interpreted as an indication of the quality of that sovereign's reign in general.<sup>16</sup> But given this lack of objectivity on his part, it seems unlikely that Abravanel's negative evaluation of kingship in general, as expressed in his biblical commentaries, would not have been influenced in some way by his personal experiences at the royal courts of Europe.<sup>17</sup> Netanyahu even go as far as locating the source of Abravanel's anti-monarchic stance in the bitter experiences of his grandfather, Don Samuel Abravanel. A courtier at the court of Seville, Don Samuel had felt pressured to convert to Christianity but towards the end of the 14th century he had managed to flee to Portugal where he returned to Judaism.<sup>18</sup> Netanyahu's view might not be implausible in view of the fact that Abravanel's first treatise on kingship occurs in his Commentary on the Books of Samuel which

<sup>15</sup> Introductions to Commentary on 1 and 2 Kings and Passover Sacrifice. Cf. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 64 and 283 note 10.

<sup>16</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 26, 63–64; Awerbuch, Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft, 41–42.

<sup>17</sup> On this point I disagree with Awerbuch who reaches to the opposite conclusion. Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 5–6.

he wrote before he entered the services of the Spanish monarchs.

However, I also consider it quite likely that the accumulative experiences of Abravanel at the royal courts of Europe would have contributed in a significant manner to his depiction of the ideal leader in his comments on Genesis 49. And I would suggest that at this late stage in his life Abravanel was drawn to reflect on his own leadership in the Jewish community, a leadership which he considered to be the form that kingship took for the Jews in their period of exile. And if, in the course of such reflections, he would have compared himself to the Christian rulers he had served in the past and found himself to be superior to them, this should not come as a surprise to us. For Abravanel considered himself to be royalty too.

Abravanel's sense of aristocracy was a trait that he inherited from his family, who claimed descent from the Davidic dynasty.<sup>19</sup> He began his Introduction to his Commentary on Joshua with the following self-introduction: אני הגבר יצחק בן איש חי רב פעלים בישראל גדול שמו אדון יהודה בן שמואל בן יהודה בן יוסף בן יהודה מבני אברבנאל כלם אנשים ראשי בני ישראל משורש ישי בית הלחמי ... "I, Isaac, son of the valiant performer of deeds, whose name is great in Israel, the honorable Judah, son of Samuel, son of Judah, of the family of Abravanel, all of them leaders in Israel, from the stock of Jesse the Bethlehemite, of the family of the House of David, a prince and legislator of my

<sup>19</sup> According to Netanyahu, this claim can easily be challenged but it does express the sense of historic mission which Isaac Abravanel exhibited throughout his life. Cf. *ibid.*, 3. But see below for the argument that this claim is an expression of leadership and authority, and that, therefore, it should not be taken literally.

people.”<sup>20</sup>

Abravanel's great pride in his family was justified, for his ancestors had held positions of leadership in the Jewish community for many generations. His father and grandfather had been financial advisors at the royal courts of Portugal and Castile respectively and an earlier ancestor, Don Judah Abravanel, had been the treasurer at the court in Seville in 1310 and, according to some sources, the *almoxarif mayor*, the Royal Treasurer, of Castile.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Goodman asserted that Abravanel had this successful and influential ancestor, named Judah, in mind, when he expounded the verse “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet.”<sup>22</sup> I would argue, however, that it is more likely that Abravanel applied this verse to himself rather than to his illustrious ancestor. For already at the age of 35 Abravanel himself functioned as a leader of the Portuguese Jewish community and represented their interests at the royal court in Lisbon.<sup>23</sup> In Spain too, soon after his arrival, Abravanel became the leader of the Jewish community and its representative at the royal court.<sup>24</sup> He wrote about this period of his life in the Introduction to his treatise Passover Sacrifice: ראש דברי “I was the head of all my people. They eagerly listened to what I would say and faithfully

<sup>20</sup> Paul Goodman, “Introduction,” 4; Attias, *Isaac Abravanel*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3 and 265 note 5; Goodman, “Introduction,” 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Goodman does not refer to the specific passage in which Abravanel makes this connection.

<sup>23</sup> Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

followed my instructions."<sup>25</sup> And again, after the Expulsion from Spain, Abravanel functioned as the spokesman for the Jewish community in Naples and was recognized as their leader.<sup>26</sup>

His leadership was widely recognized and highly praised by the Jewish community.<sup>27</sup> He was admired for his political influence, his vast learning, and his devotion to his people. References to him in contemporary sources include such descriptions as "great eagle,"<sup>28</sup> (learned) "as wise as Daniel"<sup>29</sup> (influential) and "man of God"<sup>30</sup> (prophetic leadership). According to his son Judah Abravanel, he was "a fortress and a shield for his people," a "savior of the oppressed from the hands of their enemies," who "rescued the Jews from the lions."<sup>31</sup> Thus he himself had fulfilled his own most important prerequisite for leadership: acceptance by his people.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Abravanel considered himself a descendant of the house of David and a member of the tribe of Judah reflects more than the nobility of his ancestry and the prestige of his family. For Ben-Sasson has shown that Spanish Jewry as a whole saw itself as an

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 278 note 44.

<sup>26</sup> Introduction to Passover Sacrifice. Cf. Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 65 and 283 note 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>28</sup> Beth Joseph, Orah Hayyim, 168 and Kesef Mishneh, Hil. Berakhot, III, 8, as quoted by Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 290 note 25.

<sup>29</sup> Kapsali, D'Bei Eliahu, ed. Lattes, 71, as quoted by Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 290 note 26.

<sup>30</sup> Questions and Answers to Saul Ha-Kohen (Venice, 1574), 4b, as quoted by Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 290 note 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 89 and 290 note 28.

<sup>32</sup> See above, p. 80.

elite among the Jewish dispersion and that many of the Spanish exiles claimed descent from the tribe of Judah and considered Jerusalem as their original city of origin.<sup>33</sup> Thus Abravanel's statement in connection with the leadership role of the house of Judah: "Undoubtedly the leaders and princes which the kings and the communities appointed over the Jews were all descendants of the house of David... For the majority of the exiles in France and Spain were from the tribe of Judah" is nothing but a modest way of saying that he saw himself as the latest representative of the house of Judah and is crucial to the understanding of Abravanel's self-evaluation in the context of the Blessing of Jacob.<sup>34</sup> That this was not an indication of a tendency to self-aggrandizing on the part of Abravanel becomes clear from Ben-Sasson's statement that it was the prevalent opinion in the Jewish community in Spain that the Jewish courtiers at the courts of Christian rulers played a prominent role both socially and nationally and that their leadership was a sacred mission.<sup>35</sup> Leadership of the Jewish community in Spain was linked with prominence at the royal court which in turn was the source for the highest status within the Jewish community.<sup>36</sup> As Ben-Sasson put it: "Connections with the court were the source of the highest prestige among the [Spanish] exiles. Descendants of these families prided themselves on the fact that their ancestors were: משועי יהודה הרודים בעם ... גוי קדוש וממלכה אשר

<sup>33</sup> Ben-Sasson, "Generation of the Spanish Exiles," 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ben-Sasson, "Generation of the Spanish Exiles," 28-34 and the English summary on p. I.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 29.

מלכו שנים רבות “among the nobles of Judah who ruled the people ... a holy nation and kingdom over which they reigned for many years.”<sup>37</sup> Thus it seems that the claim to Judahite ancestry was not so much a source of claimed authority as it was an expression of earned authority, and that Abravanel was following the traditions of his society in presenting himself as a scion of the house of David.

As a descendant of the house of Judah, Abravanel saw himself as the latest Jewish leader and representative of that ancient aristocracy. That he must have considered himself to have been eminently qualified for the task, is obvious. Praised by his contemporaries, powerful in many respects, possessing the restraint that was an indispensable trait of a successful courtier, and possessing the courage to speak up on behalf of his people before the Spanish monarchs, Abravanel truly was a Prince of Judah and a living example to his people that God's words, spoken through the prophet Jacob, still stood and would continue to stand until the days of King Messiah.

When Abravanel wrote his comments to Genesis 49, he lived in Venice and he must already have been aware of his getting older. Just two years after the completion of his Commentary to Genesis, probably in the first half of 1505,<sup>38</sup> in a communication to Saul Ha-Kohen Ashkenazi, he complained about the weaknesses of old age, his declining eyesight and his inability to write with his own hand.<sup>39</sup> His life would come to an end in 1508. He considered his Torah

<sup>37</sup> Ben-Sasson, “Generation of the Spanish Exiles,” 29. with quotation from Yosef Ibn Yahya, Introduction to his Torah Or as quoted by Ben-Sasson, *ibid.* and note 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 289 note 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 87 and 290 note 21.

commentary to be the culmination of his scholarly work: "I invested in it all my thought and all my knowledge."<sup>40</sup> At this point in his life Abravanel also looked back at his career as international Jewish spokesperson and leader of three large European Jewish communities and evaluated to what extent he had indeed been the effective leader that he had strive to be.

In the Blessing of Jacob he found that confirmation he sought, confirmation of his worthiness as a descendant and as a representative of the age-old Jewish leadership elite of the descendants of Judah. In the words of the Torah he also found God's blessing on his career and the confirmation that he had followed his divinely ordained destiny: "... it was in accordance with God's will that their father blessed each one of them, for the words of God and His blessings were in his mouth" (Conclusion of the Answer to Question Eight).

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<sup>40</sup> Questions and Answers to Saul Ha-Kohen (Venice, 1574), 8b, as quoted by Netanyahu, Don Isaac Abravanel, 290 note 17.



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