ISAAC ABARBANEL'S "STANCE TOWARD TRADITION": THE CASE OF *'AṬERET ZEQENIM*

by

ERIC LAWEE

The eminent turn-of-the-sixteenth-century theologian and exegete Isaac Abarbanel was hardly the first Jewish scholar to receive established principles and ways of thinking and a large body of classical Hebrew literature from the past. Nor was he the first to feel the Jewish past's "rich and intimidating legacy"[1] weighing on his intellectual and literary shoulders. Indeed, it has been noted that medieval Jewish writers habitually felt compelled to justify their intellectual-literary existence, and that they often did so using an almost conventional literary genre largely designed for this purpose—the introduction.[2]

Yet if the critical category "stance towards tradition" is germane to a complete intellectual profile of any late medieval or early modern Jewish writer

The following is a revised and much condensed version of my " 'Inheritance of the Fathers': Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Towards Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993), chap. 2 (hereafter cited as "Inheritance"). The writing of this chapter was made possible by grants from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies, to both of which I express my sincere gratitude. I am especially indebted to my teachers Isadore Twersky, Bernard Septimus, and James L. Kugel for many observations which greatly improved the chapter. Parts of this essay were delivered as a paper at the International Conference on Don Isaac Abarbanel held at Queens College and the Graduate Center of City University of New York in 1992.

1. The formulation is Walter Jackson Bate's in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 4.

2. Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 208.

(or, in varying measures, any ancient, medieval, or modern thinker or writer generally), there are reasons why it seems especially pertinent for assessing Abarbanel's intellectual cast. Foremost among these is that Abarbanel frequently appeals to tradition and depicts himself as its defender. For example, in his *Commentary on Genesis,* he affirms that the Torah's narratives must possess inner meaning, since the rabbinic sages and kabbalists propagated many esoteric explanations of them.[3] In his *Commentary on Deuteronomy,* he overturns philosophic objections to the doctrine of metempsychosis on the grounds that this doctrine is "necessarily true" according to prophetic and rabbinic tradition.[4] And in *Yeshu'ot meshiḥo,* his commentary on rabbinic messianic dicta, he promises to explicate eschatological midrashim and aggadot on the basis of "that which the sages and prophets have taught us."[5] Such appeals to and efforts to buttress the legacy of the past reflect Abarbanel's evident "traditionalist" sensibilities.[6] Other features of his teachings and writings seemingly do as well. Thus, Abarbanel's conservative theological views[7] (e.g., regarding the literal veracity of biblical miracles in the face of rationalist nonliteral interpretations thereof), elevation of each belief of Judaism to the status of a necessary dogma in his study of Jewish "principles of faith,"[8] and outwardly respectful (albeit ultimately complex) bearing before the kabbalists' claim to the mantle of tradition[9] all reinforce the image of

3. *Perush 'al ha-torah,* 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1964), 1:88.

4. Ibid., 3:230–233.

5. (Königsberg, 1861), p. 17*v.* For examples of Abarbanel acting (or seeking to act) on this commitment, see "Inheritance," pp. 238–360.

6. On the distinction between "traditional" and "traditionalistic," the latter implying a degree of self-consciousness absent from the former, see the pioneering discussion of Joseph R. Levenson in *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley, 1968), vol. 1, *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*, pp. xxi, xxvii–xxvix. For a useful overview of Levenson's approach and of modern scholarly developments in the field in the two decades following the appearance of his study, see Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples," *History of Religions* 25 (1986): 318–326.

7. For a convenient summary, see Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith* (The Hague–Paris, 1967), pp. 79–130.

8. *Rosh 'amanah,* ed. Menachem Kellner (Ramat-Gan, 1993), pp. 146–150. (For discussion of the difficulties that attend this famous position of Abarbanel's, see Kellner's introduction, pp. 22–29, and the literature cited there.)

9. The subject awaits further systematic study. See for now Moshe Idel, "Qabbalah u-filosofiyah qedumah 'eṣel R. Yiṣḥaq ve-Yehudah 'Abarbanel," in *Pilosofiyat ha-'ahavah shel Yehudah 'Abarbanel,* ed. Menahem Dorman and Zevi Levi (Haifa, 1985), pp. 73–112; "Inheritance," pp. 532–554.

a man bent on upholding inherited principles and ways of thinking, and on transmitting them to a new generation.

If, however, Abarbanel frequently venerates the legacy of the Jewish past, he often dissents from its sources in surprising ways, criticizing even sacrosanct biblical figures and rabbinic views with forthright intrepidity. For example, he castigates King David for contemptible behavior in his relationship with Bathsheba,[10] attributes grammatical irregularities in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the poor spoken and written Hebrew of these prophets,[11] and in one place even suggests that the book of Chronicles contains an error because its author, Ezra, misunderstood an earlier section of the Bible.[12] Abarbanel is no more deferent when it comes to rabbinic tradition. He regularly parses legal sections of the Torah in a manner contrary to rabbinic interpretation,[13] routinely rejects rabbinic nonlegal midrashim in terms which, by the standards of medieval Jewish Rabbanite literature, are notably severe ("unlikely," "dubious," "very strange, "evidently weak," and so forth),[14] and reworks or rejects unanimous talmudic views regarding the authorship of biblical books.[15]

In short, though he typically assumes the role of classical Jewish tradition's ally, he is at times a bold and innovative critic of the tradition's foremost texts and leading classical figures.

The following essay explores trends and tensions in Abarbanel's stance toward various layers of Jewish tradition as they emerge in his first finished work, *'Aṭeret zeqenim*.[16] Written in Lisbon sometime in the middle or late

10. *Perush 'al nevi'im rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 342–343.

11. For programmatic statements, see *Perush 'al nevi'im aḥaronim* (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 297-298, 434. For exegetical applications, see, e.g., ibid., pp. 382, 514, 571. For discussion, see my "On the Threshold of the Renaissance: New Methods and Sensibilities in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel," *Viator* 26 (1995): 298–299; Moshe Greenberg, "Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson,* ed. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta, 1989), p. 159.

12. *Perush 'al nevi'im rishonim,* pp. 543–544. See "Threshold," pp. 299–300.

13. For examples, see J. Wiesner, "Abravanels Thorakommentar, namentlich in seinem Verhaltnesse zur Halacha," *Forschungen des wissenschaftlich-talmudischen Vereins* 17 (= Beilage zu *Ben Chananja* 12 [1876]): 254–256, 174–175, 197–200, 209–212.

14. See my "The 'Ways of Midrash' in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 67 (1996).

15. "Threshold," pp. 300–304. For an English translation of the relevant passage, see my "Don Isaac Abarbanel: Who Wrote the Books of the Bible?", *Tradition* 30 (1996): 65–73.

16. On this work's date, see "Inheritance," p. 48 n. 37. *'Aṭeret zeqenim* (hereafter cited as *AZ*) was first printed in Sabbionetta, Italy, in 1557. Subsequent printed editions are Amsterdam

1460s or early 1470s, the tract is, in its outer structure, a study of a single biblical passage (Exodus 23:20–24:18), but it treats a host of broader themes: providence, prophecy, the uniqueness of the Jewish people and their Land, ultimate human felicity, and the like.[17] In later life, Abarbanel would look back on *'Aṭeret zeqenim* as a "small composition" written in his early manhood.[18] Yet if short and circumscribed by the standards of later works, Abarbanel's first work is well worth studying inasmuch as it introduces well both its author and his vast literary corpus, broaching many of the subjects that Abarbanel would treat thematically in later writings and exemplifying the literary character which his subsequent biblical commentaries (of which it should be considered the first) would take.

In addition, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* calls attention to the theme of Abarbanel's relationship to the Jewish past in diverse ways, among them by making a case for exegetical independence and intellectual innovation in its introduction; by presaging principles that Abarbanel used to delimit midrashic authority in later works, and by revealing points of contact and conflict that animated

(1739), Lemberg (1859), and Warsaw (1894). My references are to the Warsaw edition. Translations of the text are my own. A check of the first printed edition (reproduced in *Don Isaac Abravanel: Opera Minora* [London, 1972]) and various manuscripts (at the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem) yielded no significant variants for the sections of the work with which I am concerned. On *Ṣurot ha-yesodot,* an earlier work seemingly viewed by Abarbanel as incomplete, see B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher,* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 15, 268 n. 34; "Inheritance," pp. 26–28.

17. One reason among several why Netanyahu's characterization of the work as "a brief dissertation on God and the meaning of prophecy" (*Don Isaac Abravanel,* p. 16) is so deficient is that it fails to convey the work's exegetical character. Like Louis Rabinowitz before him ("Abravanel as Exegete," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures,* ed. J. B. Trend and H. Loewe [Cambridge, 1937], p. 77), Gregorio Ruiz correctly identifies the genre to which *'Aṭeret zeqenim* belongs by calling it a "commentary," but like Rabinowitz, he errs when he calls it "a commentary on Exodus 23:20" (*Don Isaac Abrabanel y su comentario al Libro de Amos* [Madrid, 1984], p. 81 n. 113; idem, "Actualidad de la exegesis de Don Isaac Abrabanel," *Identitad y Testimonio* [Madrid, 1979], p. 133). The primacy of exegesis in *'Aṭeret zeqenim* finds expression in a remark made at the end of chapter 19 (p. 73) where Abarbanel observes that having discussed a certain point, it would now be appropriate for him to examine Maimonides' approach to the same, but that he will postpone this undertaking so as not to interrupt the flow of his exegetical account.

18. *Rosh 'amanah,* p. 64. *She'elot le-he-ḥakham Sha'ul ha-Kohen sha'al me-'et . . . Yiṣḥaq 'Abarbanel* (Venice, 1574), p. 8*r* (actual as opposed to printed pagination).

Abarbanel's relationship with his most revered medieval predecessor, Maimonides, and with Maimonides' late medieval "esoteric" interpreters. (Still another prefigurative feature of the tract not touched on in the following is the stance of formal but qualified allegiance to Kabbalah adopted by Abarbanel therein as it resurfaces in later writings.)[19] In short, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* provides a unique and revelatory glimpse of Abarbanel at the earliest stage of his literary career standing before time-honored rabbinic traditions and the main medieval claimants to the mantle of Jewish tradition, the philosophers and kabbalists.

Finally, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* points to larger questions summoned by the wide-ranging and elusive term "tradition"[20] (e.g., when do traditions remain stable? why do they change? what patterns of change are evinced?)[21] and, more specifically, highlights characteristic quandaries faced by writers working within a religious tradition: when and in what areas is critical thinking concerning traditional texts sanctioned? who are the authoritative interpreters of tradition? what is the basis of their authority? at what point does reinterpretation of tradition subvert it? what theological justifications exist for modern-day efforts to discover and advance new insights?[22] In light

19. See for now "Inheritance," pp. 532–548.

20. For a linguistic perspective, see Janos Kristos Nyiri, " 'Tradition' and Related Terms: A Semantic Survey," *Tradition and Individuality* (Dordrecht, 1992), pp. 61–74.

21. See Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 63–310, 328–30.

22. There is a vast literature (theoretical, sociological, theological, and so forth) on the subject of religion's relationship to tradition in its various guises (see, e.g., the many references in *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change,* ed. Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin S. Jaffee [The Hague, 1992]), but considerably less attention has been paid to the place of the writer within the complex of problems related to this theme. For studies centered around the persistence or appropriation of tradition in modern Jewish thought and life, see *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era,* ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York, 1992; see also the account of how *Fiddler on the Roof* evolved from stories by Sholom Aleichem into a hit Broadway musical as related in the opening pages of Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Vindication of Tradition* [New Haven, 1984], pp. 3–4). For the medieval Hebrew intellectual-literary milieu, see Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis,* pp. 208, 275 n. 27. For a few striking medieval and early modern Latin examples of many that could be adduced, see Richard of St. Victor's *Prologus in visionem Ezechielis* as cited in Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, 1964), pp. 108–109, as well as the comments of Jacob Wimpheling as adduced in Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 96–97. A recent collection which takes up the theme for the Christian Middle Ages is *Ad litteram: Authoritative Texts and Their Medieval Readers,* ed. Mark D. Jordan and Kent Emery, Jr. (Notre Dame, 1992). (A kindred issue in the world of medieval Christendom is addressed in James S. Preus,

of these facts, investigation of Abarbanel's little-known and largely neglected early Portuguese work proves to be not only the natural point of departure for illustrating the subtlety and complexity of his stance toward assorted strata of classical and medieval Jewish tradition but also an extremely fertile one—one which, it is hoped, will illustrate this perspective's usefulness for illuminating aspects of Abarbanel's literary corpus and religious-intellectual configuration generally.

I

In the introduction, Abarbanel states that he was moved to compose *'Aṭeret zeqenim* by his desire to defend an anonymous group of biblical figures from the negative evaluations of them proffered by various latter-day commentators. To "complete the investigation," he decided to examine the larger scriptural passages in which the stories of these figures appeared, since "most of the foundations of the Torah and its secrets . . . are hidden within it."[23]

Twice Abarbanel stresses that he was spurred to compose his monograph by the unfavorable judgment that various rabbinic and medieval predecessors had accorded the "nobles of the children of Israel" mentioned in Exodus 24.[24] Yet despite his genuine interest in the nobles, Abarbanel also signals early on that his discussion will range far beyond this concern to include

"Theological Legitimation for Innovation in the Middle Ages," *Viator* 3 [1972]: 1–26.) For an example from the medieval Islamic sphere, see Muhsin Mahdi, "Man and His Universe in Medieval Arabic Philosophy," in *L'homme et son Univers au Moyen Âge*, ed. Christian Wenin (Louvain-La-Neuve, 1986), p. 103. Examples of later Jewish writers exercised by the question of the relationship between traditional authority and individual creativity are Eliezer Ashkenazi in the sixteenth century and Abraham Azulai (Hida) in the eighteenth. See Alan Cooper, "An Extraordinary Sixteenth-Century Biblical Commentary: Eliezer Ashkenazi on the Song of Moses," in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (= *Jewish History* 6), ed. Barry Walfish, 2 vols. (Haifa, 1993), 1:132; and the material in Dov Zlotnick, "The Commentary of Rabbi Abraham Azulai to the Mishnah," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1972): 163–167. For a contemporary reflection, including readings of rabbinic texts that reflect late-twentieth-century challenges, see Barry W. Holtz, *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts and the Lives We Lead Today* (New York, 1990), pp. 15–38.

23. *AZ*, p. 3.

24. Ibid., pp. 4, 22.

> many things better and more important than it with regard to the rest of the doubts and issues related to the pericope [in which the story of the nobles appears] and with regard to the promises made to the forefathers and our master Moses' rank in prophecy . . . such that it will seem as if this initial impetus [for the work] is of considerably less dignity than the other truths treated in this discourse.[25]

In other words, the fate of the nobles provided a pretext for Abarbanel's consideration of a host of weightier topics about which he had something (indeed, as always, a great deal) to say. Initially front and center, the nobles would occupy a relatively small place in Abarbanel's study as a whole.[26]

Why, then, does Abarbanel insist that it is earlier denunciations of the nobles that have moved him to write? A complete answer to this question must await our further investigation, but a preliminary possibility suggests itself upon consideration of the chapter in which he raises the issue of the nobles directly, since here it is revealed that these obscure figures of Jewish antiquity had, rather improbably, become a focus of attention in circles with which Abarbanel was familiar. Thus, Abarbanel tells of a conversation with a "contemporary scholar" concerning the nobles (without saying who initiated it) and of a preacher whom he heard disparaging the nobles "amidst large assemblies of Jews."[27] Currency of debate, then, was perhaps a factor, though hardly the most important one, that led Abarbanel to take up the nobles' cause and write *'Aṭeret zeqenim*.

Abarbanel drew the title for his work from a verse in Proverbs—"Children's children are the crown of elders (*'aṭeret zeqenim*) / and the glory of children are their fathers" (Prov. 17:6)—in keeping with the aim of his "small tract" to "explicate the crown and glory of their [the elders'] apprehension [of God]."[28] Yet if *'Aṭeret zeqenim* was written to defend elders of Jewish antiquity from the censure of their "children" (i.e., various later

25. Ibid., p. 3.

26. The work can be divided into five sections. In the first three, Abarbanel raises questions concerning the verses in the pericope under investigation (chaps. 1–10), sets forth propositions that he will use to answer them (chaps. 11–14), and proposes solutions to the difficulties enumerated (chaps. 15–22). In the last two, he rebuts Maimonides' interpretation of Exodus 24:11 (chaps. 23–24) and discourses on the unique qualities of the Jewish people (chap. 25). Only in chapters 8, 19, 23, and 24 does Abarbanel touch on the problem of the nobles, and of these, only in chapters 8 and 19 does he deal with this issue directly.

27. *AZ*, pp. 23–24.

28. Ibid., p. 2.

Jewish authorities), Abarbanel would, in order to accomplish this end, have to controvert the view of these authorities—his own "elders" to whom, ostensibly, he owed deference.[29] Some of the "loyalties and ambivalences" embedded in the concept of tradition[30] can, then, be retrospectively glimpsed in the very title of Abarbanel's first work.

In the opening sentences of *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* Abarbanel relates that he has "heard the accusation of many, skillful in knowledge, discerning in thought, new and old, who spread an evil report about men who are righteous and good . . . saying that they have blasphemed God in their hearts and that the nobles of the children of Israel have imputed things that were not so [to the Lord their God (cf. 2 Kings 19:9)]." Abarbanel was alluding to an exegetical tradition surrounding the ascent of the Israelites leaders up Mount Sinai as described in Exodus 24:

> Then went up Moses and Aaron and Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel; and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand; and they beheld God and did eat and drink.
>
> (Exod. 24:9–11)

This obscure biblical narrative raised a host of vexing questions: how could these leaders have "seen the God of Israel" when, according to the divine pronouncement of Exodus 33:20, no man could see God and live? What did it mean that they saw God's feet? Why did God not "lay His hand" on the anonymous "nobles of the children of Israel" mentioned in the passage, and

29. There is, then, an element of irony implicit in the work's title, drawn as it is from a biblical verse which depicts a wholly idyllic picture of the relationship between earlier and later generations. Whether this irony was intended is hard to say, as the phrase of the verse which constitutes the title is obviously removed from its scriptural context. This interpretive difficulty recurs throughout the work's introduction, which is largely a pastiche of biblical verses artfully woven together to express Abarbanel's thoughts. On the problem of interpreting this manner of Hebrew expression (the so-called "mosaic style") as it pertains to medieval Hebrew poetry, see Dan Pagis, *Ḥiddush u-mesoret be-shirat ha-ḥol* (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 70–77.

30. For the phrase, see Arnold Eisen, "The Search for Authority in Twentieth-Century Judaism," in *Religion and the Authority of the Past,* ed. Tobin Siebers, with an introduction by Wendy Doniger (Ann Arbor, 1993), p. 250 (where, interestingly in the current context, the "near synonymous usage of 'tradition' and 'the fathers' or 'the ancestors' in much contemporary [twentieth-century] Jewish thought" is also referred to).

why, more fundamentally, should He have been expected to do so? What was to be learned from the fact that the nobles "did eat and drink"?

Seeking to unravel some of these knotty questions, various rabbinic interpreters had suggested that the nobles committed a grave transgression (for which, according to some texts, they were eventually punished by death).

> "And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand." From this [i.e., the expression "He laid not His hand"], said R. Phinehas, it may be inferred that they deserved to have a hand laid on them. For R. Joshua said: did provisions go up with them to Sinai that you should be able to say, "And they beheld God and did eat and drink"? No, but it teaches you that they fed their eyes upon on the divine presence [*shekhinah*] "and they beheld God" as a man looks upon his neighbor while in the act of eating and drinking.[31]

While containing various harsh condemnations of the nobles, however,[32] rabbinic literature also offered some positive evaluations of them, as in the immediate continuation of the passage just cited: "R. Yohanan says: they derived actual nourishment, as is proved by the citation 'In the light of the king's countenance is life' [Prov. 16:15]." Similarly, the paraphrastic translation of Exodus 24:11 (which addressed several of the above-enumerated exegetical problems) found in the Aramaic Targum Onkelos stated: "to the great ones of the children of Israel no harm was done; and they saw the glory of God and they rejoiced in their sacrifices, which were accepted favorably as if they were eating and drinking."

Apart from speaking cryptically of "feeding their eyes upon the divine presence," rabbinic denunciations of the nobles generally neglected to specify their precise offense. By contrast, the critics described by Abarbanel indict the nobles on a very specific charge: that "improperly, they erred in vision and exchanged . . . the glory of the Lord for the likeness of a dumb stone . . . *attributing corporeality to God.*"[33] This interpretation of the nobles' deficiency had its origin in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed,* where the nobles were

31. *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:10.

32. See, e.g., in addition to the passage just cited, *Numbers Rabbah* 15:24; *Midrash tanḥuma, Beha'lotekha* 16. For an overview of rabbinic and later interpretations, see Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 43 vols. (New York, 1949–92), 14:272–273.

33. *AZ,* p. 1 (emphasis added). Abarbanel embeds the charge in a pun on 1 Kings 17:4 (*yom tet 'adonai geshem*), employing the concluding word of this biblical phrase in its medieval philosophic sense of "body."

depicted as "overhasty" students who "strained their thoughts" and achieved an imperfect apprehension of God "inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent."[34] While incorporating Maimonides' distinctive critique of the nobles into his presentation from the outset, however, Abarbanel does not reveal initially that Maimonides is among the nobles' foremost detractors. Instead, in distressed but respectful tones, he declares himself stupefied by earlier disparagements of the nobles: "I am bent over from hearing . . . wise men [i.e., the nobles' critics] . . . judging unfavorably these men who are perfect with us, all of them holy, with God in their midst."[35] Could it be "good in the eyes of the Lord," he wonders,

> who commanded our fathers to "honor the face of the elder" [Lev. 19:32], that a man should arise in the midst of His people who possesses knowledge by way of intellect (*'ish yodea' da'at be-ruaḥ ha-sekhel*) . . . and raise his arms to the heavens seeking out deep profundities that were concealed in earlier times which were better than these? That he should catch by the beard an elder who has acquired wisdom, a wise man or prophet, and not take mercy on him, saying rather "pursue him and snatch him" . . . ?[36]

Better to "judge the prophets and wise men favorably," avers Abarbanel, "as the divine Torah commanded and as the rabbinic sages counseled one ought to do with regard to the vulgar, as Maimonides wrote in the introduction to his book [the *Guide*]."[37]

Abarbanel's appeal to rabbinic and Maimonidean authority in support of his contention that the nobles should be judged favorably is, it turns out, quite ironic. In the passage to which he refers, Maimonides had asked his reader to pass favorable judgment on anything in his discourse which the reader deemed "in some way harmful." The sages enjoined that even the vulgar be given the benefit of the doubt, Maimonides had asserted, alluding to a well-known mishnaic directive, "all the more should this be so with respect to our erudite ones . . . who are trying to help us to the truth as they apprehend it."[38] But as Abarbanel soon reveals, Maimonides had judged the "nobles of the children of Israel" unfavorably, and in so doing he had appealed to

34. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 5 (trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963], p. 30).
35. *AZ*, p. 1.
36. Ibid., p. 2.
37. Ibid.
38. *Guide* introduction (Pines, pp. 15–16). Cf. *'Avot* 1:6.

condemnatory rabbinic precedent.[39] By invoking Maimonides' rabbinically based entreaty for kind judgment, then, Abarbanel quietly calls attention to the failure of some sages and Maimonides to heed their own advice.[40]

Finding himself unable to abide the nobles' disparagement, Abarbanel sets out to demonstrate that their apprehension of the Deity "contained no blemish" and to explain the "manner of their knowledge."[41] He states that he will not rely on "the authority of tradition (*koaḥ ha-qabbalah*)" in opposing the nobles' critics but on that which he infers from "the simple sense of the verses as they are."[42] Moreover, as he will eschew traditional authority where it favors his argument, so he will renounce it where it does not. In explaining this willingness to disregard previous condemnations of the nobles, Abarbanel begins what develops into the introduction's main programmatic statement. He affirms that he would not defend the nobles were the opinions of those who had criticized them a "received tradition (*qabbalah*) in their hands," since if such were the case it would be as if "God has spoken." But the bearers of authoritative opinion, the rabbinic sages, possessed no tradition regarding the nobles, he insists:

> [Among] the early sages (*rishonim*), each individual turned in his own direction concerning this matter, some interpreting it positively and some negatively. Each judged as he saw fit on the basis of the most compelling argument (*sevara' goveret*) and as his independent reading of the simple sense of the verses dictated (*be-ruaḥ ḥokhmah u-vinah, ruaḥ da'at bi-feshat ha-ketuvim*).[43]

Midrashic judgments concerning the nobles—and by extension other biblical figures and events—are incontrovertible when they reflect a "received tradition." When, however, nonlegal rabbinic sources speak with more than one voice, it may be inferred that no such tradition exists. Midrashic evaluations of the nobles, unfavorable or otherwise, reflect independent and ultimately fallible rabbinic interpretations. It follows, since "the chains of tradition are

39. *Guide* I, 5 (Pines, p. 30).

40. Early in the introduction to *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* Abarbanel describes the nobles' detractors as men who "judge them unfavorably" (*yadinu le-khaf ḥovah*). Now he appeals to the most formidable of these to support his contention that they should be judged in precisely the opposite way (*le-khaf zekhut*).

41. *AZ,* p. 2.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

not in their [the rabbinic sages'] hands," that "the gates of refutation to their words are not locked."[44]

As one willing to deviate from rabbinic views, Abarbanel had to devise guidelines for doing so. In *'Aṭeret zeqenim* he lays down the negative rule that (nonlegal) midrashim derived from the independent reflections of the rabbinic sages are not binding.[45] Beyond the question of formal authority, however, Abarbanel grappled with a further difficulty: could he presume that his own reflections were on the level of his forebears'? After all, those who had "pursued" the nobles were "the mighty men of old," foremost among them "the crown of the glory of wisdom" Maimonides. After offering fulsome praise of "the master," Abarbanel affirms that it would be impudent—and imprudent—to criticize him, since "all who hear [my reproach of Maimonides] will laugh at me."[46]

At this critical juncture, Abarbanel leaves aside his concern with the nobles to deliver an ardent soliloquy in defense of his participation in the process of new discovery. Building on a talmudic formula invoked by himself and many of his predecessors elsewhere, he asserts that "our forefathers have left us room to comprehend words of understanding."[47] Then, turning

44. Ibid., pp. 2–3.

45. In so doing, and in his concomitant affirmation that midrashim which reflect "received tradition" are binding, Abarbanel employs categories invoked by earlier Iberian Jewish writers. See "Inheritance," pp. 66–70, 127–128. Abarbanel never seems to have gone much beyond this negative formulation, however, and the effort to define his stance before midrashic authority is further complicated by the diverse contexts in which he confronted the question as well as the subtlety and complexity of his "rhetoric of tradition" (see, for facets of the problem, "Inheritance," pp. 201–209, 322–332). Note that with regard to the nobles, Abarbanel's argument permitting rejection of midrashic views is strengthened by the fact that these not only disagree but actually contradict one another ("some interpreting it positively and some interpreting it negatively"). It seems clear, however, that he does not regard this circumstance as a necessary condition for his dissent; mere multiplicity of opinion suffices. (Contrast, e.g., David Kimhi's commentary to Joshua 3:2, as in *Miqra'ot gedolot ha-keter,* ed. Menachem Cohen, vol. 1, *Sefer yehoshua'—sefer shofetim* [Ramat-Gan, 1992], p. 11.)

46. *AZ,* p. 3. Abarbanel puns on his first name through invocation of Genesis 21:6—*kol ha-shomea' yiṣaḥaq li*).

47. Cf. *Ḥullin* 7a: "My fathers have left me room whereby I might distinguish (*lehitgadder*) myself." Abarbanel would later summon this slogan to justify his claim that one should write many books without fear that earlier authorities had already said all there was to say. See *Commentary on Jeremiah* in *Perush 'al nevi'im 'aḥaronim,* p. 297. For earlier medieval invocations of this talmudic dictum, see, e.g., Menahem ha-Meiri, *Bet ha-beḥirah, Berakhot* (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 23, wherein the right of talmudists to exercise critical judgment in halakhic study is defended (in a way that preserves the superiority of earlier scholars); Hanokh

to Scripture, he appeals to the words of Moses: "Not with our forefathers [alone] did the Lord make this covenant 'Moses commanded us the Torah' but also with us, those of us who are here, the lesser and the greater [cf. Deut 5:3]."[48]

If, however, the wisdom of the past is simply superior to that of the present, then the right of dissent has no practical application. A rabbinic dictum alluded to by Abarbanel depicts a process of steep and seemingly unalterable intellectual decline from one generation to the next, but Abarbanel counters with an emphatic rejoinder:

> And even though the hearts [i.e., minds] of the ancients are like the opening of the *'ulam*[49] . . . and we are nothing, still we have a portion and inheritance in the house of our Father, and there are many openings [to advance fresh insights] for us and our children forever. Always, all day long, a latter-day [sage] will arise . . . who seeks the word of the Lord—if he seeks it like silver he will . . . find food for his soul which his ancestors did not envisage; for it is a spirit in man, and the Lord is in the heavens to give wisdom to fools, and knowledge and discretion to the youth.[50]

al-Constantini, *Marot 'elohim,* ed. Colette Sirat (Jerusalem, 1976), p. 22; Anselm Astruc, *Midreshei torah,* ed. Shimon Eppenstein (Berlin, 1900), p. 202. For invocations in the works of other fifteenth-century Iberian writers, see, for Abarbanel's Lisbon teacher Joseph Hayyun, "Ma'amar la-ḥakham ha-nizkar [R. Yosef Ḥayyun] 'al ḥet Mosheh ve-'Aharon," in Abraham Gross, *R. Yosef ben 'Avraham Ḥayyun: manhig qehilat lisbon ve-yeṣirato* (Ramat-Gan, 1993), p. 216; Abraham Saba, *'Eshkol ha-kofer 'al megillat Rut* (Bartfeld, 1907), p. 21*r*. For a useful collection of rabbinic and medieval texts on the theme of the "decline of the generations" and a case study in Maimonidean teachings on this point, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany, N.Y., 1996).

48. Abarbanel grafts a phrase from Psalms 115:13 onto the end of this Mosaic proclamation in order to underscore that the covenant embraces all, "the lesser and the greater." His appeal to Moses' remarks as to the ongoing nature of the divine covenant with Israel is akin to the full and emphatic declaration of the right and even duty to engage in innovation made by Eliezer Ashkenazi based on Mosaic statements found later in Deuteronomy (29:13–14: "neither with you only do I make this covenant and oath but . . . also with the one who is not here with us this day"). See *Ma'aseh 'adonai,* 2 vols. (1871; photo-offset ed., Jerusalem, 1972), 2:75*v*.

49. Cf. *'Eruvin* 53a: "The hearts [i.e., minds] of the earlier ones (*rishonim*) are like the door of the *'ulam* [a chamber in the Temple the door of which was twenty cubits wide] and that of the later ones (*'aḥaronim*) like the door of the *hekhal* [a smaller Temple chamber the door of which was ten cubits wide] but ours are like the eye of a fine needle." The implication is that criticism of one's predecessors is never legitimate.

50. *AZ,* p. 3.

The intellectual quest must meet each new generation's needs. If scholarly capacities have diminished, God yet gives wisdom to fools and knowledge "to the youth." Of course, Abarbanel's attempt to refute "ancients" in *'Aṭeret zeqenim* implies that latter-day fools, among whom he means to include himself for the rhetorical moment, may sometimes supersede their predecessors with the benefit of such "divine aid."

It is instructive to compare Abarbanel's defense of exegetical independence (and, by analogy, "intellectual freedom" generally) to arguments adduced by other medieval and later scholars who sought to explain how they could have new insights which their predecessors had overlooked. Many of them employed the analogy of a "dwarf standing on the shoulder of a giant" that has been traced to the turn-of-the-eleventh-century Christian grammarian and philosopher Bernard of Chartres. In this way, they depicted their predecessors' insights as the monumental foundation on which their own lesser but nonetheless more far-seeing perceptions rested.[51] The emphasis in

51. For the attribution to Bernard, see John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon,* ed. C. C. J. Webb (Oxford, 1929), p. 136. For the ample secondary literature on this maxim, see the sources cited in Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic License: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts* (New York, 1986), pp. 178–182 nn. 1, 5, and 16. A well-known eccentric and digressive overview of this motif's afterlife is Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (New York, 1965). For an extremely long list of premodern and modern Hebrew usages of the aphorism and secondary literature concerning some of these, see Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants," *Tradition* 27 (1993): 93–94 n. 10. A usage contemporary with Abarbanel to be added to this list is that of Abraham Bibago in *Derekh 'emunah* II–6 (as noted in Alan Lazaroff, *The Theology of Abraham Bibago: A Defense of the Divine Will, Knowledge, and Providence in Fifteenth-Century Spanish-Jewish Philosophy* [University, Ala., 1981], p. 3; Bibago uses the dictum to justify his innovative claim that Moses did not sin, traditional rabbinic opinion to the contrary notwithstanding). An illuminating discussion of the theme of cumulative intellectual progress as it emerges in the thought and writings of Abarbanel's older Byzantine contemporary Mordechai Komtino is Jean-Christophe Attias, *Le commentaire biblique: Mordekhai Komtino ou l'herméneutique du dialogue* (Paris, 1991), pp. 135–161. Until recently, it was assumed that the image was introduced into medieval Hebrew literature in a responsum of Isaiah of Trani the Elder. (See *Teshuvot ha-Rid,* ed. Abraham J. Wertheimer [Jerusalem, 1967], no. 61 [translated in Leiman, "Dwarfs," pp. 91–92].) See, however, Avraham Melamed, "Li-meqorotav shel dimui he-hagav ve-ha-'anaqim be-'nedod hesir 'oni' le-rabbi 'Avraham ibn 'Ezra," *Meḥqerei yerushalayim be-sifrut 'ivrit* 13 (1992): 95–102 (in which a version of the parable found in a poem of Abraham ibn Ezra written soon after Bernard of Chartres' coinage is discussed). For analysis of the parable's significance, see Isadore Twersky, "The Contribution of Italian Sages to Rabbinic Literature," *Italia Judaica: Atti del I Convegno internazionale Bari* (Rome, 1983), pp. 396–397, and, in greater detail, Miller, *Poetic License,* pp. 9–20. My presentation of the dictum's purport

Abarbanel's defense of intellectual freedom lies elsewhere, on the highly individual quest of the contemporary scholar seeking food for "*his* soul." It is this quest which engenders the discoveries that previous scholars "did not envisage." In Abarbanel's presentation, modern insights do not rest necessarily on the lofty achievements of the past.

Spirited in substance, Abarbanel's defense of intellectual innovation is deferential in tone, with expressions of filial awe abounding even as a litany of assertive arguments is compiled: the intellects of the early sages reach "the heart of the heavens," while the new generation is "nothing." The sages of the past are everywhere described as "ancestors": "our ancestors have left us room . . . ," "not with our ancestors [alone] did the Lord make this covenant," "he will find food for his soul that his ancestors did not envisage." The new generation, far from trying to uproot the past, merely seeks its "inheritance in the house of our Father." The past's superiority is acknowledged with rhetorical flourish even as its authority is qualified.[52]

The respectful tone disappears rapidly, however, when Abarbanel comes to apply his claim of exegetical independence to the case at hand and, having placed his argument on a broad theoretical footing, advances a final justification of his right to defend the nobles. Since, he says, the nobles' accusers

> summoned strength . . . to wage war on the nobles of the people, priest and prophet . . . talked impudently . . . to denigrate their apprehension in the eyes of any bird,[53] so I will not restrain my mouth, since the relation of *my*

concurs with Miller's conclusion concerning the "double-edged nature of the analogy" (ibid., p. 179 n. 5) even in its medieval usages (i.e., as conveying a sense of "modern" superiority in addition to an assertion of ancient greatness).

52. More could be said about the introduction's rhetoric, which at times tempers the substance of Abarbanel's argument (as here, where deferential rhetoric softens otherwise forceful assertions of independence) and at times reinforces his point (as when, wishing to emphasize the impudence implicit in condemnation of the nobles, Abarbanel repeatedly alludes to their venerableness and wisdom: ...האם כבדו מזוקן וקני העם ושטריו אשר חכמו מחכמת כל בני קדם ...חכמים כל עוד שמזקינים חכמה נתוספת בהם; *AZ,* p. 2). On yet other occasions, Abarbanel's diction gives the ostensibly deferential sharp bite, as when he speaks of the "great men of old who have pursued (*radefu*) the nobles of the people." The negative connotations of "pursuer" are evoked even as those said to have engaged in the activity are described as "great men." Deference is laced with rebuke.

53. Cf. Prov. 1:17: "For in vain the net is spread / In the eyes of any bird." A later passage suggests what this appellation might be intended to connote. Abarbanel speaks of Maimonides'

> understanding to *their* understanding is many times greater than the worth of their intellects' understanding to the understanding of the nobles *in whom the Lord's spirit spoke*—especially as they [the critics] would curse [the nobles] and I shall bless . . . [54]

Abarbanel concludes his introduction with a forthright and incisive critique of his "elders." It is they who have disregarded the disparity between earlier and later generations and "talked impudently" against those greater than them. Specifically, they have ignored the fundamental distinction between prophets and nonprophets, a distinction which Abarbanel alludes to here ("in whom the Lord's spirit spoke"), as he does earlier in the introduction in a passage already cited (wherein, somewhat more ambiguously, he contrasts those who possess "knowledge by way of intellect" with a "wise man or prophet"). The nobles' prophetic character establishes their superiority over their latter-day critics. Hence, Abarbanel not only has the right but the duty to defend these prophets of antiquity even though the criticisms against them derive from his own "elders." Of the elders, Abarbanel says that he will "speak and not fear them in accordance with the Torah." Far from being an act of irreverence toward the past, then, his dissent is enjoined by the Torah, tradition's highest authority. "To the help of the Lord against the mighty!" he exclaims.[55]

His rhetorical call to arms notwithstanding, by the end of the introduction to *'Aṭeret zeqenim* the reason for Abarbanel's preoccupation with the nobles remains none too clear. The problem becomes more acute when the reader, turning to the body of the work, finds that only a small portion thereof discusses the nobles at all.[56] Yet Abarbanel insists that the nobles' plight provided the impetus for his wide-ranging tract. As he was sensitive to

having "spoken wondrously in the eyes of any bird—[i.e.] the masters of true traditional investigation (*ba'alei ha-'iyyun ha-'amiti ha-toriyyi; AZ,* p. 75)." One could, then, reasonably suspect that Abarbanel inserted this peculiar expression here in order to intimate that even well-meaning traditional scholars have been caught in the net spread by the nobles' accusers; caution is called for, however, since Abarbanel uses this phrase often in later writings with no obvious special intent (see, e.g., *Pirqei 'avot 'im perush Mosheh ben Maimon ve-'im perush naḥalat 'avot* [New York, 1953], p. 271; *Yeshu'ot meshiḥo*, p. 4*v*).

54. *AZ,* p. 3 (emphasis added). The key passage reads: כי יחס השגתי להשגתם כפולה מכופלת מערך השגת שכליהם להשגת האצילים אשר רוח אלהים דבר בם.

55. *AZ,* p. 3.

56. See above, n. 26.

matters of structure already at this early stage of his literary career,[57] the disproportion between this insistence and the final form of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* demands explanation.

The exclamation "To the help of the Lord against the mighty" suggests a solution; for it serves as a reminder that the biblical narrative concerning the nobles' vision had become an interpretive crux by Abarbanel's day, mostly due to the influence of the "mighty" Maimonides. Maimonides cast a spotlight on the nobles in *Guide* I, 5, and a host of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophic writers—Shem Tov Falaquera, Moses Narboni, Joseph ibn Kaspi, and Gersonides among others—had followed suit, reflecting on the exegetical and theological implications of the brief and elliptical biblical narrative in which the nobles' story was told. These interpreters not only debated the nature and extent of the nobles' failure but also whether to accept Maimonides' negative appraisal of them.[58]

The nobles continued to garner attention down to Abarbanel's day. Joseph ibn Shem Tov, an older Spanish contemporary greatly admired by Abarbanel, adopted Maimonides' condemnatory interpretation of the nobles' vision with but few changes (this, in a sermon delivered at a family celebration!).[59] The elders of Exodus 24 also received passing mention in a short exegetical piece of Abarbanel's Lisbon teacher Joseph Hayyun—mention which revealed Hayyun's understanding that these figures were not prophets at all.[60] Still more

57. The very form of *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* which Abarbanel himself delineates (*AZ,* pp. 3–4), itself reveals a yen for structured discourse. Abarbanel first raises questions concerning the biblical passage under consideration, then sets forth the premises needed to address them, then answers the questions raised. Individual chapters of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* also exhibit attention to structure, with Abarbanel scholastically enumerating the views of other authorities, the objections to those views, philosophic propositions, and so forth. On concern with structure as a key feature of Abarbanel's hermeneutic sensibilities and writing, see my "Isaac Abarbanel's Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship: A Retrospective and Opportunity," *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III,* ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris. In Press.

58. See Shaul Regev, "Re'iyat 'aṣilei benei yisra'el be-filosofiyah ha-yehudit bi-yemei ha-benayim," *Meḥqerei yerushalayim be-maḥashevet yisra'el* 4 (1984–85): 281–302.

59. Ibid., pp. 298–302. For Abarbanel's positive evaluations of ibn Shem Tov see *Perush 'al ha-torah,* 2:253; *Perush 'al nevi'im rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1955), p. 285. Abarbanel was also a purveyor of ibn Shem Tov's wisdom; see David Kaufmann, "La Famille de Yehiel de Pise," *Revue des études juives* 26 (1893): 81.

60. "Perush la-ḥakham ha-nizkar [R. Yosef Ḥayyun] be-farashat beha'alotekha," as in Gross, *Ḥayyun,* p. 203. Hayyun treats the question in the course of explaining Moses' complaint in Numbers 11:14, "I am not able to bear all this people myself alone." In response, God

immediately, there was the "contemporary scholar" with whom Abarbanel discussed Maimonides' account of the nobles and the preacher whom he heard expounding on it "amidst large assemblies of Jews."

For an up-and-coming scholar seeking to make a name for himself, then, the story of the nobles served as an ideal point of departure for a maiden literary sortie. Not only could Abarbanel apply his exegetical talents to an enigmatic, now notorious biblical narrative for which, as will soon be seen, he had a strikingly original interpretation. But because this narrative appeared in a biblical passage which, as he saw it, contained "most of the foundations of the Torah and its secrets," his analysis could serve as a springboard for wide-ranging discussion of a host of knotty theological issues. In the venture of redeeming the "nobles of the children of Israel" lay the seeds of the broad exploration of fundamental questions that became *'Aṭeret zeqenim*.

II

By incorporating Maimonides' interpretation of the nobles' divine vision into *'Aṭeret zeqenim* from the start, Abarbanel implied that all the nobles' critics, rabbinic ones included, shared the specifically Maimonidean understanding of that vision. Likewise, in his systematic discussion of the nobles, Abarbanel begins by citing rabbinic sources but turns immediately to "the divine master who sheds light on the earth," Maimonides, to clarify "in what their [the nobles'] sin consisted." It is as if Maimonides' critique indubitably represented what earlier rabbinic expositors had in mind.[61] Was Abarbanel oblivious to the possibility that rabbinic allegations against the

commands Moses to "gather seventy men of the elders of Israel" to help him rule over the people. But were there not, Hayyun asks, seventy elders (i.e., the nobles) to assist Moses since the time of the revelation at Sinai? Hayyun answers: "*since the [earlier] elders were not prophets* such that the Israelites would be affected by them and heed their words, Moses requested that there be other prophets with whom God would also speak . . . ." Hayyun's works generally date from the third quarter of the fifteenth century; see Yosef Hacker, "R. Yosef Ḥayyun ve-dor ha-gerush mi-portugal," *Ẓiyyon* 48 (1983): 279. Thus, it is likely though not entirely beyond dispute that these remarks were penned prior to the composition of *'Aṭeret zeqenim*.

61. Abarbanel would continue to associate the rabbinic and Maimonidean critiques in later years; see *Perush 'al ha-torah*, 3:48–49, where he uses Maimonidean language in relating the midrashic view of the nobles.

nobles might be glossed differently? It seems unlikely; but he may have been inclined to accept Maimonides' reconstruction of them more uncritically than usual rather than having to undertake the difficult task of recasting obscure midrashic dicta into terms with which he then could take issue. What, for instance, was he to make of the claim that the elders had "fed their eyes on the Shekhinah as a man looks upon his neighbor while in the act of eating or drinking"? Faced with so inscrutable an indictment, Abarbanel might have been grateful to Maimonides for at least accusing the nobles of an offense (ascribing corporeality to God) that was readily understood.

Yet, as Abarbanel himself observed, Maimonides' account of the nobles' transgression was hardly lucid. At the beginning of *Guide* I, 5, Maimonides asserted that intellectual perfection must be preceded by moral perfection and by the acquisition of certain preparatory sciences; he then singled out Moses as one whose apprehension of God was preceded by fear of looking upon God. Finally, he contrasted Moses with the "nobles of the children of Israel," who sought divine wisdom while lacking the proper preparation. The nobles were "overhasty, strained their thoughts, and achieved apprehension, but only an imperfect one," Maimonides claimed. It was the flawed anthropomorphic content of their divine vision—and emphatically not an actual description of the Deity—that Scripture had recorded:

> "And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under His feet, etc." . . . These words are solely intended to present a criticism of their act of seeing, not to describe the manner of their seeing. Thus they were solely blamed for the form that their apprehension took inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent—this being necessitated by their overhasty rushing forward before they had reached perfection.[62]

Like various later figures in Jewish history in Maimonides' estimation (e.g., the rabbinic sage Elisha ben Abuyah and even the prophet Ezekiel), the nobles had, according to Maimonides, sought for an understanding of divine matters while lacking sufficient preparation.[63] As a result, they achieved an anthropomorphic apprehension of God wholly antithetical to Maimonidean

62. *Guide* I, 5 (Pines, p. 30).

63. See the addendum in Zev Harvey, "Keṣad lehathil lilmod 'et moreh nevukhim ḥeleq 'aleph pereq 'aleph," *Daat* 21 (1988): 22 n. 6, and, for further elaboration on the case of Elisha, Sara Stroumsa, "Elisha Ben Abuyah and Muslim Heretics in Maimonides' Writings," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–93): 175–181.

theology's unsurpassed stress on divine incorporeality (hence, Maimonides' insistence that the biblical account related the contents of their misguided "act of seeing" and not an accurate "manner of seeing" which included real predicates of God).[64] Still, Maimonides had not explained in precise, philosophic terms just how the nobles had ascribed corporeality to God. In *Guide* I, 28, he indicated that the nobles had apprehended "the true reality of the first matter"—that matter from which, in the Aristotelian understanding, all physical objects in the sublunar world were composed;[65] and Abarbanel finds Maimonides attempting to substantiate this assertion elsewhere in the *Guide*.[66] But, affirms Abarbanel, the terse account of *Guide* 1, 5 is nowhere elucidated.

Characteristically, Abarbanel reviews earlier interpretations of this account before preceding to his own. The first he reports in the name of the fourteenth-century southern French Maimonidean commentator, Moses Narboni, who, in Abarbanel's rendering of him, suggested that the nobles' error lay in their apprehension of the Active Intellect as the "proximate cause of the first matter," a perception which was mistaken because "intellect, insofar as it is intellect, does not move matter."[67] Abarbanel pronounces himself "surprised" by this proposal. Surely, he says, Maimonides did not believe that the nobles were given their death sentence for so slight a lapse. Indeed, according to a pronouncement of Aristotle quoted by Maimonides in the *Guide,* the perception which Narboni ascribed to the nobles was entirely

64. For the most recent study of Maimonides' battle against biblical (and rabbinic) anthropomorphism, see Zev Harvey, " 'Gadol kohan shel nevi'im'," *Daat* 37 (1996): 53-61.

65. See John Herman Randall Jr., *Aristotle* (New York, 1960), pp. 207-18.

66. Cf. *Guide* II, 26 and III, 4. Note that an undiscerning or even careful reader might easily miss the relationship of these chapters to the nobles' vision, not only because the vision is mentioned only fleetingly therein but also because the chapters occur long after Maimonides' explicit exposition of the nobles vision in *Guide* I, 5 and I, 28 is complete.

67. *AZ,* p. 23. The interpretation which Abarbanel cites does not appear in Narboni's commentary on *Guide* I, 5 nor, as best I was able to determine, in any other relevant place in his commentary. To compound the difficulty, Abarbanel suggests in his *Commentary on the Guide* (*Moreh nevukhim* [1872; reprint Jerusalem, 1961], part 1, p. 22r) that Narboni's interpretation accords with his own view as developed both in *'Aṭeret zeqenim* and the *Commentary on the Guide* – something he here denies. Cf. Maurice R. Hayoun, *Moshe Narboni* (Tubingen, 1986), p. 98, who mentions the references to Narboni in *'Aṭeret zeqenim* and Abarbanel's *Commentary on the Guide* but offers no enlightenment as to the location of the said interpretation in Narboni's writings.

correct.[68] In other words, the "sin" which Abarbanel understood Narboni to have advanced in Maimonides' name is either trivial or no sin at all.

According to Zerahiah ha-Levi, relates Abarbanel, Maimonides' view was that the nobles perceived God as a "force in the sphere of the sun."[69] Though Abarbanel does not explain this interpretation's origins or implications, they can be readily reconstructed. Maimonides had taught that the Israelites who left Egypt were inured to the ideas and practices of Sabianism, a name given by him to what he depicted as the near-universal pagan religion of the ancient world. The Sabians believed that the heavenly bodies were gods, and the sun "the greatest deity." The "utmost attained by the speculation of those who philosophized in those times," claimed Maimonides, was that "God was the spirit of the sphere."[70] Viewed in light of the teaching that vestiges of Sabianism endured among the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt, Zerahiah's suggestion that the nobles perceived God as a force in the sphere of the sun implies that Maimonides considered them still to be under the sway of the thorough-going materialism of the ancient world. This line of interpretation was apparently popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Joseph ibn Kaspi indicated that "a few" of his fourteenth-century contemporaries propounded a similar view (though even the normally audacious ibn Kaspi finds the "Sabian interpretation" of the nobles' vision too much to swallow),[71] while Abarbanel's older contemporary, Asher Crescas, noted that "there are some" who explained Maimonides to mean that the nobles perceived God as the "spirit of the sphere," this being the view that

68. Cf. *Guide* II, 4 (Pines, p. 258): "the relation of the Active Intellect to the elements and that which is composed of them is similar to the relation obtaining between every separate intellect particularly related to a sphere and that sphere." The implication is that, as the separate intellects move the spheres to which they are related, so the Active Intellect moves the elements which ultimately derive from "first matter". This understanding accords precisely with that which Narboni – in Abarbanel's version of him – ascribes to the nobles.

69. According to Jacob Guttmann (*Die Religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel* [Breslau, 1916], p. 38), the reference is to Zerahiah (Ferrer Saladin) Halevi, a student of Hasdai Crescas. Cp. Moritz Steinschneider, "Ḥiyyunim le-toldot R. Zeraḥiah ben Yiṣḥaq ben She'alti'el Ḥen," *'Oṣar neḥmad* 2 (1857): 231, who notes that the reference could not be to the prominent thirteenth-century Maimonidean commentator Zerahiah b. Isaac b. She'altiel Hen since it would then be impossible on chronological grounds to understand Abarbanel's subsequent suggestion that Zerahiah's interpretation may have been influenced by Gersonides.

70. *Guide* III, 29 (Pines, pp. 514-15).

71. *'Amudei khesef* as in *Sheloshah qadmonei mefareshei ha-moreh* (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 20.

Maimonides had described as the "utmost attained by the speculation of those who philosophized in those times."[72] Without allusion to the possible Sabian implications of Zerahiah's interpretation, Abarbanel condemns it as a "worthless perception into the divine master's words." Maimonides states that the nobles apprehended "the true reality of first matter which derives from Him," he notes. He says nothing about the nobles' apprehension of God as a force in the sphere of the sun.[73]

Abarbanel rejects on similar grounds the opinion of the unnamed "contemporary scholar" with whom he discussed Maimonides' understanding of the nobles' vision. According to this scholar, Maimonides believed that the nobles perceived God as a "universal corporeal form attached to the first matter at every moment."[74] Again, though Abarbanel does not undertake to so do, the sources of this view can easily be recovered. Medieval Aristotelians held that the matter out of which the four basic elements were composed ("second matter") came about through a conjoining of "first matter" and "corporeal form." Abarbanel would discuss this corporeal form at great length in his latest surviving work, arguing among other things that no such notion existed in Aristotle's corpus despite its prevalence among his medieval glossators.[75] In the anonymous scholar's understanding, Maimonides believed that the nobles' ascription of corporeality to God lay in their perception of the Deity as the formal cause of first matter. While conceding that this interpretation has textual support, Abarbanel rejects it (as he had Zerahiah's) on the grounds that it does not jibe with Maimonides' assertion in *Guide* I, 28 that the nobles' apprehension "had as its object the first matter and the relation of the latter to God, inasmuch as it is the first among the things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption."[76] Abarbanel insists, in other words, that Maimonides believed that the nobles perceived God as first matter's efficient, not formal, cause.[77]

72. *Moreh nevukhim*, p. 21r.

73. *AZ*, p. 23.

74. Ibid.

75. *She'elot u-teshuvot*, pp. 18r-18v. Cf. Harry A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 99 ff., 579–590; Arthur Hyman, "Aristotle's 'First Matter' and Avicenna's and Averroes' 'Corporeal Form'," *Essays in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York, 1977), pp. 335-406.

76. Pines, p. 61.

77. *AZ*, p. 23.

Finally, Abarbanel recounts the interpretation of the preacher whom he heard elaborating on Maimonides' view "amidst large assemblies of Jews," according to which Maimonides believed that the nobles apprehended God as "some sort of body." Rebuking the preacher for ignoring all other statements concerning the nobles in the *Guide,* he cries:

> Heaven forbid, heaven forbid, that the master and teacher of righteousness should think concerning the nobles of the children of Israel . . . that which these scholars understood from him after that which the Torah testified regarding them [that] "they saw the God of Israel," which Onkelos paraphrases as: "they saw the glory of the God of Israel." Though it does not devolve upon me to explicate the master's words in this discourse, behold, in order to save him from the mouths of lions who think iniquitous thoughts about him, I shall declare my opinion concerning the [correct] interpretation of his words before investigating whether his opinion corresponds to the truth or not.[78]

Having justified his right to take issue with the nobles' critics, Maimonides foremost among them, Abarbanel now seeks to rescue the "master" from "lions" who impute to him "iniquitous thoughts."

Actually, paradoxical though it appears in the context of Abarbanel's defense of the nobles from Maimonidean attack, this undertaking to "save" Maimonides is in keeping with the animating impulse of *'Aṭeret zeqenim;* for if in his first work Abarbanel challenges Maimonides' deprecatory view of their common "elders" the nobles, he also treats Maimonides as an elder himself—one whose honor must be upheld and, it turns out, defended. To defend Maimonides, however, is to do battle not with his critics but with his self-proclaimed latter-day disciples. This is the purport of Abarbanel's later remark that many of Maimonides' interpreters have "gone far from him."[79] He draws on a verse which speaks of one whose "friends have gone far from him" (Prov. 19:7), intimating that it is Maimonides' ostensibly "friendly" commentators who have strayed from, distorted, and thereby done a grave disservice to their master's intended teaching. It is to rescue Maimonides from these injurious commentators that Abarbanel undertakes his explanation of the true meaning of Maimonides' condemnation of the nobles.

As might be expected given his critique of earlier Maimonidean expositors, Abarbanel takes his bearings from the explicit statements in *Guide* I, 28 that

78. Ibid., p. 24.
79. Ibid., p. 26.

the nobles apprehended "the true reality of first matter which derives from Him," and, more particularly, that they apprehended "the first matter and the relation of the latter to God inasmuch as it is the first among things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption." In essence and in short (though, characteristically, Abarbanel does not hesitate to expatiate), Abarbanel understands these assertions restrictively: the nobles apprehended only the first matter and God, and not the intermediaries through which God moves and controls the first matter—namely, the intellects and spheres.[80] This understanding of Maimonides was widespread: writing at the turn of the fifteenth century, Profet Duran (Efodi) mentioned it as one of three he had seen, while Asher Crescas also attributed it to "some commentators."[81] As for how this error implied an ascription of corporeality to God, Abarbanel explains (after quoting the relevant Maimonidean text and alluding to the medieval view that the spheres possessed souls through which they experienced desire of the higher beings, i.e., the Deity and the intellects):

> [Maimonides wrote:] "They were solely blamed for the form that their apprehension took inasmuch as corporeality entered into it to some extent." He means to say that since that which moves the [four] elements to existence is not like that which moves the sphere—[for that] which [moves the sphere] moves it by desire,[82] whereas that which moves the first matter and the elements in their [various] configurations must move them by means of a corporeal force and through [bodily] contact—therefore, corporeality entered into the apprehension of the elders; for they ascribed an element of corporeality to the Creator as a result of saying that He is the proximate cause of first matter.[83]

By viewing God as the "proximate" instead of "ultimate" cause of first matter, the nobles ascribed corporeality to the Deity, since bodies comprised of first matter are moved only by another body acting on them.

Having clarified what he takes to be the main substance of the Maimonidean assessment of the nobles, Abarbanel offers a paean to "the master" which ends in a harsh denunciation of his disciples:

80. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

81. *Moreh nevukhim*, pp. 21r-22r.

82. Cp. Guide II, 4. The spheres express their desire by seeking to emulate the higher beings; this they do by performing the most perfect action possible. The spheres being corporeal, this action takes the form of the most perfect action of which a body is capable, which is perpetual circular motion.

83. *AZ*, p. 25.

> Blessed be the Creator who created him [Maimonides] to perfect His people . . . and happy is the one who approaches [the task of] understanding his [Maimonides'] words with clear method (*'iyyun zakh*) and upstanding beliefs (*'emunot meshubaḥot*); for this will prepare him to understand words of wisdom and not to see in the words of the master perversity or crookedness, even though men from among the children of Israel—some inadvertently, and some because they were ensnared by the corruption of their beliefs—stumbled in understanding the words of the master and guide in many places in his book [the *Guide*]. They fell into the trap of their heresy and foolishness . . . and spoke against God and Moses [i.e., Maimonides]. . . . They spoke wrongly about him, did not believe his word, did not fathom his intention, pursued him with their evil devices, and did not know his ways, all of which are good to him who understands.[84]

Singled out initially as the nobles' foremost "pursuer," Maimonides is, it turn outs, himself the object of pursuit by disciples armed with "evil devices." Though Abarbanel does not identify the devices in question, he alludes to them when he states that many Maimonideans "did not believe his word." In attempting to unravel the meaning of the *Guide,* these commentators took their bearings from Maimonides' emphatic assertions that he had spoken with "exceeding precision," and that, when speaking of "very obscure matters," he had deliberately concealed his true meaning (or rather the truth)[85] from "the vulgar."[86] Accordingly, such interpreters endeavored to detect the contradictions and decode the hints that they assumed were scattered pervasively throughout the *Guide* in order to arrive at its true teaching.[87] According to Abarbanel, however, in allegedly reconstructing Maimonides' true teaching, such commentators had actually distorted it by viewing his expressions through the prism of their own predetermined (and in some cases heretical) theological agenda. In so doing, they had defamed Maimonides and God.

His indirect condemnation of them notwithstanding, Abarbanel actually shares much in common with Maimonides' esotericist commentators. He, like them, takes Maimonides' account of the nobles as the starting point for

84. Ibid., p. 26.

85. See Pines's remark in his introductory essay to his translation ("The Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," p. lviii).

86. *Guide*, introduction (Pines, pp. 15-20).

87. For an overview of esoteric interpretation of Maimonides through the ages see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Sitrei torato shel moreh nevukhim: ha-parshanut be-dorotav u-vedorotenu," *'Al da'at ha-maqom* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 147-49.

his own deliberations concerning the nobles' vision, and he, like them (and Maimonides before), finds allusions to the separate intellects, celestial spheres, and sublunar elements embedded in Holy Writ. An exegetical aside made in the course of developing his own explanation of the nobles' vision illustrates how ingrained in Abarbanel was the habit of reading classical Jewish texts in light of philosophic categories. That he takes the phrase "the like of the very heaven for clearness" (Exod. 24:10) as a reference to the outermost celestial sphere[88] is telling, if not exceptional, insofar as by so doing Abarbanel invests the biblical text's *'eṣem* with its medieval philosophic meaning of "essence."[89] Truly instructive, however, is Abarbanel's further comment that "it is not as Rashi explained that it [*'eṣem*] denotes 'appearance'. . . since the term essence would not be used with regard to appearance, which is an accident."[90] Abarbanel reflexively transposes not only biblical expressions but even Rashi's philosophically innocent comments into Aristotelian terms, as if the language of essences and accidents had been spoken by Jews in all times and places. Though very real, Abarbanel's differences with the esotericists stemmed from a shared universe of discourse in which Maimonides was the "prime mover."

While reflecting points of contact with Maimonides and his followers, however, Abarbanel's account of the nobles' vision is more striking as a witness to his decidedly different theological tendencies.

> "And they saw the God of Israel and there was under His feet . . . " [Exod. 24:10]. It means they perceived that the Lord who is the God of Israel and [who] exercises providence [over them] directly and [who] took them out of Egypt and gave them the Torah—that He Himself governs the lower beings and He governs all of the higher beings, the separate intellects and the spheres.[91]

In his own interpretation of the nobles' vision, Abarbanel preserves the philosophic tenor of Maimonides' account but characteristically places the universal-cosmological component within the larger framework of God's special relationship with the Jewish people. (This, it might be noted, makes for elegant exegesis; after all, the verse does stress that it was "the God of Israel"

88. *AZ,* p. 70.

89. See, e.g., Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Perush ha-millot ha-zarot*, s.vv. *'ekhut* and *'eyem*; Jacob Klatzkin, *'Oṣar ha-munaḥim ha-pilosofiyim*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1930), 3:154 ff.

90. *AZ,* p. 70.

91. Ibid.

that the elders saw.) The elders of Israel, in Abarbanel's rendering, perceived precisely those higher realms of the cosmos (spheres and separate intellects) that, in his interpretation of Maimonides, they had failed to perceive. But more importantly, they understood that the God who governed these realms was the very God who "took them out of Egypt and gave them the Torah." In short, these Jewish elders comprehended precisely what Abarbanel would expect pious and prophetic ancient Israelite leaders to recognize: that the transcendent God of the cosmos, the God of the philosophers, is also the immanent and provident God of Jewish history.

Having laid out his interpretation, Abarbanel raises an additional question as to why the Israelite leaders were ordered to ascend Mount Sinai in the first place. Slightly earlier in *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* paying characteristic attention to narrative structure, he had concluded that the invitation was related to the divine pronouncement at the outset of the larger biblical pericope, "Behold, I send an angel before thee to keep thee by the way" (Exod. 23:20).

> I think . . . that since the angel's coming to the people might have caused them to be mistaken with regard to its divinity [such that] they would have worshiped it like the rest of the idol-worshipers . . . God commanded Moses "Come up to the Lord" [Exod. 24:1]—all this, so that they [the elders, according to Abarbanel's preferred interpretation] should apprehend . . . His rulership over all of the separate intellects and spheres.[92]

Addressing the question of "the need for this ascent" again, Abarbanel reaffirms that the elders were instructed to ascend the mountain "so that they would know the angel being sent to them was a messenger of God possessing no element of divinity."[93]

Abarbanel now tackles two further problems enumerated in his list of difficulties as compiled earlier in *'Aṭeret zeqenim.*[94] The first concerns the biblical text's dramatis personae: if the "nobles of the children of Israel" of verse 11 are identical with the "seventy elders of Israel" mentioned two vezses earlier, why does Scripture refer to them by a new name? The second concerns an apparent pleonasm in the text: why, after recording that the Israelite leaders "saw (*vayyiru*) the God of Israel," does Scripture repeat in the verse following that they "beheld (*vayyeḥezu*) God"? Abarbanel resolves

92. Ibid., p. 68.
93. Ibid., p. 71.
94. Ibid., pp. 26-27.

the first question by distinguishing two groups hitherto treated as one, the "elders" on one hand, and the nobles on the other. The latter, he now says, did not ascend Mount Sinai, since, although they were "wise men" and "heads of the tribes," they "did not attain the level of pure prophecy like the elders." Abarbanel tries to sustain this interpretation by arguing that the expression "And to the nobles of the children of Israel He sent not forth His hand" means that God did not send forth the "hand of His prophecy" to them.[95] Having distinguished the elders from the nobles, Abarbanel can easily resolve his second question. The apparent redundancy in the biblical account of the leaders' apprehension exists because Scripture speaks of two qualitatively different apprehensions of God attained by two distinct groups. The elders received an exalted vision of the Deity ("saw the God of Israel"), as Exodus 24:10 records, whereas the nobles merely "beheld God," as Exodus 24:11 states, since they did not attain the level of "pure prophecy" received by the elders. The nobles received only a "brief, divine" vision, meaning that they "apprehended the existence of God in a general, incomplete (*bilti mushlemet*) way."[96]

If, by the end of his exegetical voyage, Abarbanel has traveled far from his soaring rhetorical exaltation of the nobles in the introduction to *'Aṭeret*

95. To support the contention already found in the *Guide* (II, 41) that "God's hand" at times refers to prophecy, Abarbanel adduces Ezekiel 37:1 and 40:1, both of which contain the expression "the hand of the Lord was upon me." Nonetheless, the application of the Maimonidean notion here is, on strict exegetical grounds, hard to accept. Though "*yad*" refers to prophecy on a few occasions in the Bible, the idiom *shalaḥ yad* (usually followed by preposition *be* but, as in Exodus 24:11, occasionally by other prepositions) almost exclusively means "to stretch forth one's hand *against*." Of course, it is this standard significance of the idiom that prompts the rabbinic interpretation of the nobles that Abarbanel seeks to overturn ("He laid not His hand," whence it may be inferred that they "were deserving that [His] hand should be laid on them"). Two of Abarbanel's contemporaries, Isaac Arama (*'Aqedat yiṣḥaq*, ed. H. J. Pollak, 6 vols. [1849; reprint Jerusalem 1960], 2:147v) and Abraham Saba (*Ṣeror ha-mor* [Benei Berak, 1991], p. 343) adopt the same interpretation of "hand" as Abarbanel. Though not unprecedented in medieval Hebrew exegesis (see, e.g., Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Maṣeref le-khesef* [Cracow, 1905], p. 214; Aaron Aboulrabi, *Perushim le-Rashi* [Constantinople, 1625; photo-offset New York, 1990], on Exod. 24:11; *Leqaḥ tov*, cited in Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, p. 273, no. 101), these contemporaries might have adopted this interpretation under Abarbanel's influence. If such is the case, we would – given the early date of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* – have an instance of Arama borrowing from Abarbanel as opposed to the usual reverse situation (regarding which see Sarah Heller-Wilensky, *R. Yiṣḥaq 'Aramah u-mishnato* [Jerusalem, 1956], pp. 53-57).

96. *AZ*, p. 71.

zeqenim, he has by no means abandoned them or his dispute with the rabbinic sages and Maimonides. In his condemnation of the nobles' "imperfect" apprehension, Maimonides had indicated that their vision was severely flawed.[97] By contrast, Abarbanel lauds the nobles as prophets whose admittedly "general, incomplete" apprehension of God still marked a major achievement. In this he remains a Maimonidean, apparently viewing prophecy as a fundamental human perfection. In sum, the core of the introduction's argument remains: the nobles were prophets, albeit low-level ones, and even sub-optimal biblical prophets are superior to their postbiblical nonprophetic critics. Indeed, this argument points to a recurring leitmotif of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* as a whole: the quarrel between philosophy and prophecy. The relationship between this theme and Abarbanel's defense of the nobles does not, however, emerge with great clarity in *'Aṭeret zeqenim.* By contrast, it stands very much at the fore in Abarbanel's discussion of the nobles in his *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed.* Here, Abarbanel forgoes entirely the opportunity to make the nobles' case; as a commentator on the *Guide,* he says, it is his task to explicate Maimonides, not to criticize him.[98] Yet for this very reason, with the issue of their personal stature pushed into the background, Abarbanel's account in the *Commentary on the Guide* clarifies better the larger issues that he perceived to be at stake in the medieval controversy over the nobles' vision.

III

The opening lesson of *Guide* I, 5 is that intellectual perfection may be attained only after various propaedeutic requirements have been met.[99] A

97. For elaboration see Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides on the Science of the *Mishneh Torah*: Provisional or Permanent?," *AJS Review* 18 (1993): 180-81.

98. *Moreh nevukhim*, p. 22v (though note that Abarbanel does not abide by this policy throughout his commentary; see, e.g., his remarks on *Guide* I, 9 [p. 26v] and the lengthy critique of Maimonidean prophetology in the commentary to *Guide* II, 32 [ibid., part 2, pp. 69r-70r]).

99. On the chapter's teaching and place in the overall structure of the *Guide,* see Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Guide*, trans. Pines, p. xxviii (whose understanding of the chapter's main concern differs from Abarbanel's; cf. *Moreh nevukhim*, p. 21r). On the pertinence of the chapter's teaching to the official addressee of the *Guide*, Joseph ben Judah, see Joel L. Kraemer, "Maimonides on Aristotle and Scientific Method," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, D.C., 1989), pp. 56–59. Much contemporary scholarly debate surrounds especially the question of the precise relationship of perfection in deed to intellectual perfection in Maimonidean thought; for the main views and ample bibliography, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta, 1990).

human being, states Maimonides, should "not hasten too much to accede to this great and sublime matter [the knowledge of God] at the first try without having made his soul undergo training in the sciences and the different kinds of knowledge, having truly improved his character, and having extinguished the desires and cravings engendered in him by his imagination."[100] The nobles, he adds, illustrate this point. Maimonides buttresses this observation with an elliptical biblical citation: "It is said accordingly, 'And let the priests also, that come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them' [Exod. 19:22]."

In seeking to unfold the teaching of *Guide* I, 5, in his *Commentary on the Guide,* Abarbanel adheres to his commitment not to criticize Maimonides. Following his standard procedure, however, he considers not only Maimonides' words but also the extensive interpretive literature that had built up around them by his day, and when reviewing this, Abarbanel feels quite free to criticize, since, as he had already indicated in *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* some commentators imputed esoteric views to Maimonides which Abarbanel was certain Maimonides had never intended. In his view, two prominent commentators had done just that in their commentaries on *Guide* I, 5.

Both Moses Narboni and Profet Duran discerned a radical teaching lurking beneath Maimonides' enigmatic utterances concerning the nobles. Specifically, they found hints of a parallel between the preparations required to achieve intellectual perfection, as enumerated at the beginning of *Guide* I, 5, and the preparations made by the Israelites prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai, alluded to by Maimonides via his cryptic citation of Exodus 19:22 later in the chapter. The "priests" are "those who investigate," says Duran. They wish to "come near to the Lord"—that is, to apprehend divine science and attain knowledge of God's existence. First, however, they must take care to "sanctify themselves"—that is, train themselves in the requisite propaedeutic sciences, "lest their intellects incur damage, as occurred to the nobles."[101] Though Duran issues a terse concluding directive to "understand this," suggesting thereby that he has spoken with deliberate restraint, the thrust of his interpretation is clear: the citation of the verse pertaining to the preparations undergone by the Israelites at Mount Sinai in the middle of *Guide* I, 5 should be understood in light of Maimonides' earlier enjoinder to "undergo training in the sciences" before investigating obscure matters.

100. Pines, p. 29.
101. *Moreh nevukhim*, p. 22v.

Indeed, fragmenting his own presentation, Duran spells out this interpretation with surprising frankness elsewhere in his commentary.[102] Prior to Duran, Narboni had made the same connection while commenting on the preparations enumerated by Maimonides at the beginning of *Guide* I, 5: " 'Having truly improved his character.' This corresponds to its [Scripture's] dictum, 'let them wash their garments' [Exod. 19:10]. 'And having extinguished the desires and cravings engendered in him by his imagination.' This corresponds to its [Scripture's] dictum, 'come not near a woman' [Exod. 19:15]."[103]

To Abarbanel, the import of Narboni's and Duran's interpretations was clear: "Narboni and Efodi [Duran] . . . decreed that the master hints here that the revelation at Mount Sinai is a parable for [intellectual] apprehension." He spells out this view's grave implications, then thunders against them:

> I am utterly amazed that a Jew should say that the vision of our forefathers at Sinai was an intellectual apprehension and not a [prophetic] vision of God! Moreover, I am bent over from hearing such a view attributed to the master; for if this were so, then why should he have related at the beginning of [*Guide*] Part II, chapter 33 that at the gathering at Mount Sinai "not everything that reached Moses also reached all Israel," but that Moses apprehended his prophecy as it came, while the rest of Israel heard the great voice but not the articulations of speech, which he tried to explain there. If it were as these commentators who have sinned at the cost of their lives would have it, then there was no external voice [which the Jews] heard there, but simply an intellectual apprehension of the type that we have nowadays. Heaven forbid, heaven forbid, that the master should intend this wicked thing![104]

Narboni and Duran did not deny the historical reality of "the vision of our forefathers at Sinai," Abarbanel suggests, but their interpretation of it threatened to rob it of its incontrovertible eternal significance. If Narboni and Duran were right, then Maimonides had understood the Sinaitic "revelation" as a "parable for apprehension" no different in principle from the workings of reason that "we have nowadays." Writing in his *Commentary on Exodus* some three and half decades later, Abarbanel formulated his objection this

102. Ibid., p. 55r.

103. *Be'ur la-moreh* as in *Sheloshah qadmonei mefareshei ha-moreh*, p. 3. Duran presumably borrowed this line of interpretation from Narboni as was his wont even though he never cites Narboni by name (Hayoun, *Moshe Narboni*, pp. 89–91).

104. *Moreh nevukhim*, p. 22v.

way: if at Sinai the forefathers only engaged in rational investigation, then "what need was there for them to ascend the mountain? They could have philosophized in their tents!"[105] In Narboni's and Duran's commentaries on the *Guide,* Abarbanel found clear implications that indeed they could have and perhaps did do just that.

To refute this "wicked" reading of Maimonides, Abarbanel appeals to *Guide* II, 33, wherein Maimonides had treated the difficulty that while not all of the Israelites could have possessed the preparatory perfections required for prophecy, all collectively experienced the divine revelation at Sinai. Maimonides had resolved this difficulty by distinguishing between the different degrees of prophecy attained by Moses and the rest of the people.[106] But whatever his answer, argues Abarbanel, the fact that Maimonides raised the question shows that he understood the event at Sinai as prophetic for all concerned. As for the citation of Exodus 19:22 in *Guide* 1, 5, Abarbanel insists that this was simply Maimonides' way of providing an analogous example of the need for proper preparation in readying oneself for an encounter with the divine. In other words, in citing the verse, Maimonides intended to comment on the quest for intellectual perfection, the explicit concern of *Guide* I, 5, not to insinuate anything about the character of the events at Sinai.

Viewed in light of his discussion of *Guide* I, 5 in his *Commentary on the Guide,* Abarbanel's defense of the elders of Exodus 24 in *'Aṭeret zeqenim* emerges as a defense of biblical antiquity over the present as derived from antiquity's access to prophecy.[107] And viewed in light of Abarbanel's assault on Narboni's and Duran's interpretations of *Guide* I, 5, this defense also takes on the character of an argument on behalf of the unique, infallible, and prophetic character of the revelation at Sinai—an understanding of this event which, Abarbanel insists, Maimonides certainly shared. The elders of Exodus 24 are largely forgotten by the end of *'Aṭeret zeqenim,* but the cause which they represent, prophecy, and its superiority to philosophy—a theme that reverberates throughout Abarbanel's later writings—is not.

105. *Perush 'al ha-torah*, 2:231.

106. Pines, pp. 363-66. For a survey of treatments of this question and cognate ones proffered by Maimonides and his followers, see Shaul Regev, "Hitgalut qoleqṭivit u-ma'amad har sinai 'eṣel ha-Rambam u-mefareshav," *Meḥqerei yerushalayim be-maḥashevet yisra'el* 4 (1985): 251-65.

107. Abarbanel's argument is clarified at its deepest theoretical level through reference to the discussion in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 83-84.

IV

'Aṭeret zeqenim displays many features which, taken together, mark Abarbanel's later writings as distinctively his—among them a commitment to full-orbed, theologically searching Bible study; cautious but confident independence before midrashic authority; ongoing engagement with and selective fidelity to the principles of medieval rationalism; intense preoccupation with the person and teachings of Maimonides; and forceful and systematic criticism of Maimonides' esoteric interpreters. Finally, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* evinces Abarbanel's familiarity at the earliest stage of his literary career with a vast panoply of exegetical, theological, and philosophic currents, Jewish and non-Jewish, ancient and modern, and his tendency to bring them to bear on one another.

In addition, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* draws attention to the subject of Abarbanel's relationship to assorted anterior layers of classical and early medieval Jewish tradition. In the tract's introduction, Abarbanel upholds his right to dissent from rabbinic and early medieval condemnations of the nobles. In the body of the work, he exercises that right. In so doing, he aroused the ire of at least one contemporary, the Italian kabbalist Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano,[108] who in his *'Iggeret ḥamudot* denounced Abarbanel—this "man from Portugal"—for barefacedly defaming the rabbinic sages.[109] As Elijah saw it, *'Aṭeret zeqenim* was primarily designed to "destroy the words of the rabbinic sages and all of the other commentators that the nobles of the children of Israel erred in their apprehension [of God]."[110] As, years before, Abarbanel had been "unable to

108. On whom see Roland Goetschel, "Elie Hayyim de Genazzano et la Kabbale," *Revue des études juives* 142 (1983): 91-108; Alexander Altmann, "Me-'al li-gevul ha-pilosofiyah: demuto shel ha-meqqubal R. 'Eliyah Hayyim Genazzano," *Meḥqerei yerushalayim be-maḥashevet yisra'el* 7 (1988): 61-101.

109. Altmann (p. 64) plausibly uses Abarbanel's arrival in Italy in 1492 to fix the *terminus ad quem* for *'Iggeret ḥamudot*, arguing that Elijah would not have referred to Abarbanel as "this man from Portugal" if so well-known a figure were already on Italian soil as he wrote.

110. *'Iggeret ḥamudot*, ed. A. W. Greenup (London, 1912), pp. 13-14. As has already been observed, only a few chapters of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* are ultimately devoted to the issue of the nobles. Hence, Elijah's comment that the work's "fundamental purpose" (*'iqqar*) is to refute the negative view of the nobles must be understood either as a reflection of Abarbanel's assertions in the work's introduction that this aim provided his "initial inspiration" or of Elijah's cursory reading of Abarbanel's tract.

Elijah's presentation of Abarbanel's approach to the nobles as a dissent from all earlier commentators is also problematic. Elijah does deal with the favorable account of Onkelos

abide" earlier criticisms of the nobles, so Elijah found himself "unable to abide seeing him [Abarbanel] deride the words of our sages."[111]

Not all who have read Abarbanel's first work share Elijah's assessment. Saul ha-Kohen, a contemporary Cretan student of philosophy who queried Abarbanel about aspects of the *Guide* near the end of Abarbanel's life, described *'Aṭeret zeqenim* as a work in which its author had sought to "return the crown to its rightful place, to the heads of the wise and understanding nobles,"[112] and this evaluation, which appears in a rhetorical aside, has been advanced more clearly and assertively by several twentieth-century students of Abarbanel who saw in *'Aṭeret zeqenim*—and indeed in its very title—a sort of *pars pro toto* for Abarbanel's essential conservatism.[113] It should by now be clear, however, that neither these modern evaluations of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* nor Elijah's assessment do justice to the richness and complexity of Abarbanel's first literary creation. In truth, the substance and rhetoric of *'Aṭeret zeqenim* reflect disparate tendencies, both of which were integral components of Abarbanel's "intellectual personality":[114] conservatism, on the one hand, and free, occasionally bold independence from traditionally received opinions, on the other.

Stanford University
Stanford, California

(*'Iggeret ḥamudot*, p. 20.), seeking to demonstrate (rather improbably, and contra Abarbanel's understanding) its concord with the negative view of the nobles found in other rabbinic sources but he ignores the approbatory view of the nobles found in the commentaries of Abraham ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, and Gersonides to which, indeed, Abarbanel had made reference (*AZ*, pp. 27-28). However this may be, Elijah apparently distinguished between Abarbanel's (to his way of thinking) uniquely brazen departure from midrashic dicta and those of earlier Jewish writers. Thus, he charges that Abarbanel "criticized midrash improperly – not in secret, quietly, and by way of hint. Rather, he desecrated the name of [the aggadists (*ba'alei 'aggadah*)] in public."

111. *'Iggeret ḥamudot*, p. 13. I hope to treat the conceptual components and intellectual contexts of Elijah's critique in a separate study.

112. *She'elot*, p. 1r.

113. E.g., Abraham J. Heschel, *Don Jizchak Abravanel* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 6-7. Heschel writes that Abravanel was "conservative in his essence and thought" and that "the title of the work of his youth 'The Crown of the Elders' expresses this stance." Cp. Ruiz, *Don Isaac Abrabanel*, p. xxx; Ephraim Shemueli, *Don Yiṣḥaq 'Abravanel ve-gerush sefarad* (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 87.

114. I owe this coinage to David Grene, *Greek Political Theory* (Chicago, 1965), p. v.