

ABSTRACT

LIMITATIONS OF A PROPHET:
R. ISAAC ABARBANEL ON THE HUMAN ELEMENT
IN THE PROPHECIES OF JEREMIAH – BETWEEN MEDIEVALISM
AND HUMANIST EXEGESIS

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With respect to biblical scholarship, ‘humanism’ well sums up the innovative focus among Renaissance scholars on the human as opposed to the divine side of biblical texts. In Jewish tradition, no writer exemplifies this novel focus – and the audacious results it could yield – more than Isaac Abarbanel, who composed most of his vast literary corpus in Renaissance Italy after Spanish Jewry’s 1492 expulsion. This article studies a startling manifestation of Abarbanel’s exegetical humanism that appears in his commentary on the book of Jeremiah, written in Venice in 1504: the claim that many of Jeremiah’s oral and written expressions suffered from a diversity of imperfections. This account includes the remarkable historicizing explanation that prophetic expression is traceable to aspects of the prophet’s biography and historical setting. The article traces elements of continuity in Abarbanel’s presentation with medieval (especially Maimonidean) teachings on the human side of prophecy as they stand at the nexus of Greco-Arabic philosophic poetics, psychology, and prophetology. At the same time, it identifies dimensions of that presentation consonant with ideas and habits of mind attested by Renaissance humanists. In short, this case study shows how Abarbanel’s approach to Jeremiah reflects an unusual confluence of intellectual traditions born of his status as a transitional figure from medieval to early modern times. More broadly, it opens a window on shifts in scriptural commentary that lead some modern scholars to regard Renaissance humanism as the beginning of developments that lie at the heart of modern biblical scholarship.