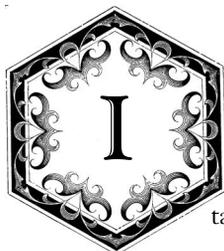


## Chapter 1

### ☞ Life and Contexts ☞



In a letter that he sent to the Cretan scholar Saul Hako-  
hen Ashkenazi a few years prior to his death, Isaac Abar-  
banel observed that he had written all of his “commen-  
taries and compilations”

after I left my homeland (*'ereṣ moladeti*); for all of the days that I was in the courts and palaces of kings occupied in their service I had no time to study and looked at no book but squandered my days in vanity and years in futile pursuit so that wealth and honor would be mine; yet the wealth was lost by evil adventure and “honor is departed from Israel” [1 Sam. 4:21]. Only after wandering to and fro over the earth from one kingdom to another . . . did I “seek out the book of the Lord” [Isa. 34:16].<sup>1</sup>

This personal retrospective, stark even after allowances are made for its imprecision and an autobiographical topos that it reflects,<sup>2</sup> alludes to major foci of Abarbanel’s life. He engaged in large-scale commercial and financial endeavors. He held positions at three leading European courts. He was a broad scholar who authored a multifaceted literary corpus comprising a variety of full-bodied exegetical tomes and theological tracts. And during roughly the last third of his life, in consequence of Spain’s expulsion of its Jews in 1492, his existence was characterized by itinerancy, often in isolation from family and scholarly peers. Situate these themes and their cognates on a wider historical, cultural, and intellectual canvas, and the result is a rich tableau at the center of which stands an ambitious seeker of power, prestige, and wealth who ardently cultivated the intellectual life and its vocations as exegete, theologian, and writer.

Isaac son of Judah Abarbanel (Abravanel, Bravanel, Barbanel, Habravanel)<sup>3</sup> was born in Portugal to an illustrious Ibero-Jewish family that, beyond its venerable roots in Spain, traced its origins to the royal Davidic house.<sup>4</sup> Abarbanel’s grandfather, an acclaimed figure at the courts of three Castilian kings, came to prominence during the 1360s, a decade that saw a Castilian-Aragonese war

and Castilian succession struggles that brought “devastation and ruin” to Castile’s Jewish communities.<sup>5</sup> The only contemporary description of Samuel Abarbanel comes from Menahem ben Zerah, rabbi in Alcalá de Henares, who became indebted to Samuel for material assistance that he desperately required due to the Castilian civil strife. He described Abarbanel’s grandfather as his “reviver” and told of “a patron of scholars who, when the turbulence of the times abates, desires to delve into the books of writers and discourses.”<sup>6</sup> Yet Menahem felt compelled to add that the involvement of Castile’s Jewish courtiers in the vicissitudes of the political fray were such that these courtiers displayed “vacillation” in their observance of “obligatory commandments” like prayer, recitation of blessings, avoidance of forbidden foods, and Sabbath and festival observance.<sup>7</sup> It does not occasion complete surprise, then, that Samuel Abarbanel received baptism, taking as his Christian name Juan Sánchez de Sevilla, even as it is somewhat startling to learn that this event very likely occurred prior to the anti-Jewish riots that swept through Spain in 1391–92, leaving thousands of Jews dead and tens of thousands of others as forced converts to Christianity. Samuel’s grandson would emulate his family’s long-standing tradition of engagement in Jewish communal endeavor and assiduous service to non-Jewish royalty but would never mention in writing his grandfather’s conversion, which Samuel may never have renounced.<sup>8</sup>

If Samuel Abarbanel remained a Christian, taking some sons along with him, several other sons deviated from his spiritual path, including Judah Abarbanel, who eventually established himself in Lisbon as a merchant and tax farmer with ties to Portuguese royalty and nobility. Most notably, Judah served as financier to Fernando, the son of Portugal’s King Duarte. In 1437, this prince set out on a conquest of Tangiers with his famous brother Henry, who was later dubbed “the Navigator” in recognition of his pioneering contributions to Portuguese maritime exploration. When, after the expedition’s dismal failure and nearly a dozen years in slavery, Fernando finally breathed his last, his will specified repayment of a huge debt to “the Jew [Judah] Abarbanel, resident of Lisbon.”<sup>9</sup>

The year of Fernando’s Tangiers expedition saw the birth to Judah of a second son, Isaac. The year following saw Duarte’s death and the accession to the throne of his nephew Afonso V, whose reign would prove highly advantageous for Portuguese Jewry.<sup>10</sup> In the fifteenth century’s middle decades, Judah Abarbanel maintained close ties with Afonso’s court. By the early 1460s, his son Isaac was receiving special privileges from the king, including an exemption from the requirement to wear the “Jewish badge” and the rights to carry weapons and stay at Christian inns.<sup>11</sup> Historical documentation is mostly silent regarding other aspects of Isaac’s earliest decades but, in general, this period of Portuguese history witnessed frequent epidemics, considerable political turmoil, an appreciable cultural reawakening, more overseas discoveries of the sort that

had astounded Europe earlier in the century, and in 1449, three years after Afonso's coming of age and as Isaac was about to achieve Jewish majority, a civil war and major outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in Lisbon, the first in the country's history.<sup>12</sup>

Abarbanel was reared in Portuguese Jewry's preeminent settlement, the Lisbon community. Numbering probably several thousand and economically prosperous, this community boasted, in addition to the Abarbanel, other Jewish clans characterized by wealth, pride, and pedigree. Foremost among them were the ibn Yahya, one of whose number, Gedaliah, held the royally-appointed post of Portuguese chief rabbi (*rabi mor*) along with his progeny for over half a century. He and his son Abraão also served as physicians to three Portuguese monarchs, including Afonso V, and, like others in the family, held important communal posts, like ritual slaughterer (*degolador*).<sup>13</sup> In the 1470s, Abraão's cousin Gedaliah ben David, another ibn Yahya high in Afonso's retinue, exchanged letters with Isaac Abarbanel concerning matters of state while on a military expedition with the Portuguese king.<sup>14</sup>

Attesting their strong consciousness of noble ancestry and high station, members of Lisbon's Jewish elite often referred to their fathers by the Hebrew *nasi* (prince), an honorific with an Iberian history stretching back to the "golden age" of the Jews in Muslim Spain. Those so designated were wealthy communal leaders and, typically, well-connected with non-Jewish society's upper echelons as well. In Christian Spain, awareness of lineage intensified within Jewish circles after 1391, as increasing emphasis on the noble title "Don" reflects. In Portugal, the equivalent "Dom" was prefixed to the names of distinguished Jews such as Judah and Isaac Abarbanel. Referring to his father in Hebrew, Isaac invoked the sobriquet *nasi* as well.<sup>15</sup>

The sense of pedigree among Portugal's leading Jewish families was reinforced by their tendency towards endogamy.<sup>16</sup> An example is one of Abarbanel's daughters, who married her cousin Joseph. This son-in-law's financial career would remain intertwined with Abarbanel's through Isaac's and Joseph's (alleged) enmeshment in various conspiracies fomented against Afonso V's son and successor, João II, and beyond.

Joseph's political and economic fortunes were linked to those of Dioguo, duke of Viseu,<sup>17</sup> a leading noble. Those of his father-in-law were tethered to the power and prestige of the Bragança, Portugal's dominant noble house. Though the basis of the Abarbanel-Bragança association was joint economic interests, personal dimensions were not lacking, as attested by a letter of condolence written in Portuguese by Abarbanel and sent to the duke of Bragança's eldest son upon the death of his father-in-law.<sup>18</sup> Upon his flight from Portugal following implication in a Bragança plot against João, Abarbanel alluded to his "great love" for his patron-friends.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond political advantages and social prerogatives, Bragança ties bestowed

considerable material benefits. In the death sentence passed against him in 1485 for ostensible participation in treasonous Bragança undertakings, Abarbanel is described as the duke's "most great servant and friend" and as "extremely rich and land-wealthy [*afazemdado*]." <sup>20</sup> Among choice rural properties on Lisbon's outskirts held by Abarbanel was an estate given to him by the duke for services rendered. <sup>21</sup> The duke could afford the gift. When the strife between him and João reached its height, he commanded over fifty cities, castles, and towns and a formidable military force. <sup>22</sup> If the notion of a "Jewish aristocracy" is perhaps too readily assumed by historians of Iberian Jewry, <sup>23</sup> it seems wholly apt in Abarbanel's case.

Well-connected to Portuguese nobility, Abarbanel also maintained associations with Jewish aristocracy elsewhere—or at least so his habit of writing annually to Italian Jewry's preeminent banker and patron of culture Yehiel da Pisa suggests. <sup>24</sup> In the earliest of the three letters sent to Yehiel that have survived, Abarbanel expresses sympathy for his friend's recent unspecified troubles as apparently described in Yehiel's earlier missive, <sup>25</sup> then describes his role as one of twelve "princes" appointed by the Jewish community to redeem 250 Jews from slavery following Portugal's capture of the North African city of Arzilla in summer 1471. Abarbanel and another traveled from city to city to free these "children of Zion" from their "wretched plight," a task that proved "a great burden" for six months. <sup>26</sup>

His position at court allowed Abarbanel to intercede on behalf of Jewish community interests. Yehiel is asked to speak "words of peace" to two emissaries who are "favorites of the king" that have been sent to greet Sixtus IV upon his elevation to the papacy. (One, probably João da Silveira, Abarbanel describes as a dear friend who has promised to "speak favorably before the Pope on the Jews' behalf.") Displaying diplomatic savvy, Abarbanel enjoins Yehiel to extol Afonso for his benevolence towards the Jews before the envoys. <sup>27</sup> But a few years later, in 1478, this Pope would respond positively to a request by Spain's monarchs to establish a national inquisition to investigate the Christian loyalties of the country's *converso* population. Around the same year, Yehiel's son Isaac, eventually to assume his father's pivotal role in Italo-Jewish economic and cultural life, would meet Abarbanel and other Portuguese-Jewish luminaries on a visit to Lisbon. <sup>28</sup>

As he wrote to Yehiel in 1472, Abarbanel's own standing as one of the king's "favorites" was confirmed. Indeed, it was in this year that he received a prerogative enjoyed by few other Jews: classification as a "resident" of the municipality in which he lived with all attendant "privileges, honors, and liberties," including the right to live outside the Jewish quarter. <sup>29</sup> This was granted as recompense for "special services" that go unspecified, but Abarbanel's role as royal *servidor* during this period is subject to some reconstruction. In the early 1470s, he, along with the offshoot of another wealthy Lisbon Jewish family,

served as a chief supplier of fine cloth to Afonso and other nobles. And when Afonso initiated his ultimately failed campaign against Castile at mid-decade, this same colleague, Gedaliah Palaçano, was, along with Abarbanel, a major underwriter. Indeed, their loans in cash and cloth, when added to those of a third Lisbon Jew, Moses Latam, nearly equalled those of all Lisbon's Christians combined. No wonder that upon fleeing Portugal Abarbanel lamented the riches he had left behind.<sup>30</sup>

If Abarbanel traveled beyond the borders of his native land prior to his forced departure from it, his destinations can only be surmised. Still, travel was, by all indications, a significant part of his routine. Already in his first work, finished in the late 1460s, Abarbanel portrays himself as one "cast out from before study" having become a "wanderer . . . given over to business." In his 1472 letter to Yehiel, he explains that another work remains incomplete since "I am at home but little and my travels come as a whirlwind to scatter me from the gates of investigation so that I have been unable [to finish]."<sup>31</sup> The commercial interests of Judah Abarbanel extended as far as the great northern European center of textile production in Flanders, where Isaac's father would occasionally serve as a conduit between Afonso and his "factor (*feitor*)" for business operations there.<sup>32</sup> As Isaac increasingly relieved his father of business responsibilities in the early 1470s, he may also have undertaken such journeys. In later life Abarbanel told of "wisdom" he had heard from the mouth of Joseph ibn Shem Tov.<sup>33</sup> Since this Castilian theologian and preacher apparently died around 1460, Abarbanel would have been quite young at the time, but one might presume an encounter with this older contemporary while en route. One might even wonder, despite the complete lack of evidence, whether Abarbanel's association with Yehiel was nourished by personal contacts developed on trips to Italy. It has already been noted that Yehiel's son visited Abarbanel in Lisbon, and Abarbanel did have Italian business contacts while in Portugal.<sup>34</sup> "Who . . . in his youth will not take to the road or journey to a distant land for two or three years to engage in business and reap financial profit?" This was the rhetorical question that Abarbanel posed to Saul Hakohen late in his own life when enjoining Saul to relocate to Venice to pursue intellectual riches in the form of Maimonidean studies guided by Abarbanel.<sup>35</sup> The question would seem to contain autobiographical echoes.

Christian-Jewish relations in Abarbanel's Portugal are thought to have been relatively tranquil. Joseph Hayyun, Lisbon's presiding rabbinic presence during Abarbanel's youth and early maturity, could, in an exegetical context, speak of "gentiles . . . who love us and would not speak wicked or hateful things against us."<sup>36</sup> Yet the Lusitanian scene did not lack for interreligious tensions. Though Afonso quickly suppressed the Lisbon riot of Abarbanel's youth, such protection did little to mitigate the heightened anti-Jewish sentiments that remained in its wake, as stoked by popular writers, performers of passion plays, and the

occasional preacher.<sup>37</sup> One such preacher, Mestre Paulo, spoke vociferously against Jews in regions under Bragança control, eliciting letters of protest to the king from Jews forced to attend his sermons. Afonso returned a ruling siding with the Jews and offering protection from such maltreatment in the future.<sup>38</sup>

In some cases, Abarbanel himself became a focal point of Christian discontent. Pamphleteers derided him and other prominent Jews as possessors of unbridled financial power and embodiments of decadent habits that corrupted Portuguese society and emboldened Jewish converts to return to their ancestral faith.<sup>39</sup> Merchants protested benefits derived by Abarbanel and Moses Latam from the leasing of royal properties, lamenting that these Jews were “more favored than the Christians” even as they attended at court to interests of their “partners” and coreligionists. The merchants’ brief further objected that Abarbanel and his ilk obtained whatever they wished by a simple request to “your [royal] highnesses”—accompanied, to be sure, by a substantial cash payment.<sup>40</sup> Anti-Jewish social movements were, it would seem, more prevalent on the Portuguese landscape during Abarbanel’s formative years than has hitherto been appreciated.<sup>41</sup> Apparently, the financial opportunism of Lusitano-Jewish entrepreneurs like Abarbanel and the profits and privileges that it bestowed particularly rankled.

There were other doleful moments for Abarbanel while in Portugal besides ones traceable to the direct expression of Christian hostility. The 1472 letter to Yehiel reveals his distress at the fate of the captives of Arzilla and a sense of Jewish precariousness “in every place.”<sup>42</sup> The mid-1470s saw the passing of Abarbanel’s father<sup>43</sup> and the early 1480s another recurrence of plague, driving the Abarbanels from their Lisbon abode. In 1481, Abarbanel spoke of his life as a “fugitive” in consequence of the pestilence, while seeking to comfort his friend Yehiel over his daughter’s conversion to Christianity some two years earlier.<sup>44</sup> Unmentioned in the letter to Yehiel was the recent sudden death of Afonso due to plague, an event that marked the beginning of the end of Abarbanel’s life in the land of his birth.

With the ascension to the throne of Afonso’s son in 1481, Abarbanel’s fortunes at court were bound to deteriorate: João II was determined to curb noble power, and the Bragança were inevitably his primary target. Looking back, Abarbanel would speak (in characteristic biblically inflected prose) of “a new king . . . who . . . turned his heart to . . . deal craftily with his [noble] servants.”<sup>45</sup> The end came in spring of 1483, when the duke of Bragança was beheaded, two of his brothers took refuge in Spain, and Abarbanel, facing a royal warrant for his arrest, fled to Castile along with other Jewish notables.<sup>46</sup> Eventually João ordered the destruction of Abarbanel’s Lisbon dwellings in the belief that valuables and incriminating documents might be hidden there. Then, having ordered them rebuilt, he gave them to Isaac Latam, son of Abarbanel’s erstwhile

business partner Moses. Abarbanel's prized seats in the synagogue and precious library were disbursed to other royally connected Lisbon Jews.<sup>47</sup> It was not long before he was sentenced in absentia to a "natural death"—execution by hanging or something more brutal—for his ostensible role in the Bragança plot against João.

Scholars have long debated the plausibility of João's charge of treason against Abarbanel, weighing such factors as Abarbanel's intimate association with the Bragança against his unwavering protestations of innocence (he not only denied involvement in the conspiracy but its very existence) and strongly stated theoretical disapproval of royal deposition under any circumstances. In discussions "before kings and their wise men," Abarbanel denied the right of rebellion against a monarch, even if he had "transgressed to commit every crime." A recent attempt to weave together the strands concludes that Abarbanel and his son-in-law Joseph, also implicated in antimonarchic intrigue, were not actively involved in the affairs, but that João believed that they must at least have known of the conspiracies against him. On this reading, it was for their failure to draw appropriate conclusions and forewarn the king that the Abarbanels were blamed.<sup>48</sup>

Despite such ups and downs, Abarbanel looked back upon his Portuguese years with favor throughout most of his life. And though he depicted them to Saul Hakohen as a long interval misspent in royal "courts and palaces," these four and one-half decades conjured up much happier memories in their immediate aftermath and for decades to come. Very much missed, as an "elegy" prefaced to a biblical commentary written soon after Abarbanel's removal to Spain makes clear, were the "renowned" city of Lisbon; the riches and honor that were now lost; the "house full of God's blessings," which had served as a "meeting-place for scholars"; the "thriving reign" of Afonso V; Abarbanel's delight as he sat "in the king's shade," and, of course, the king's "dependence" on Abarbanel such that at times he felt like Daniel walking in "the palace of the kingdom of Babylon."<sup>49</sup> Unmentioned in this glance back, but presumably a source of satisfaction, were the three sons (Judah, Joseph, Samuel) and one or more daughters born to Abarbanel in Lisbon, and the many achievements of his fiscally adept son-in-law Joseph.<sup>50</sup> Years later, as he wrote in Italy in the shadow of the calamity of the Spanish expulsion, auspicious images of Lisbon again filled Abarbanel's head: wealth, honor, and Torah learning accrued; Pass-overs in the company of family, friends, and multitudinous guests; and, indeed, (divinely granted) elevated status in the "courts and palaces of kings and nobles"<sup>51</sup> such as Abarbanel would rue in his letter to Saul Hakohen.

Forsaking "the woman whom the Lord designated for me, the children whom God graciously bestowed upon me,"<sup>52</sup> and his possessions, including an ample library, Abarbanel escaped to Castile in May 1483. The year was portentous for Spanish Jewry: in January the Spanish Inquisition had ordered the

expulsion of Andalusia's Jews, with the result that when Abarbanel crossed into Segura de la Orden, some thirty kilometers from the Portuguese border, the city's population was swelling with Jewish refugees from this first of the "Spanish expulsions."<sup>53</sup>

Inquisitorial activity against Spain's *converso* population, under the determined leadership of inquisitor-general Tomás de Torquemada, had commenced in the early 1480s, a period that had also seen Spain's declaration of war against the emirate of Granada, Islam's last Iberian outpost. Seen in light of the expulsion of 1483 and other lesser pre-1492 expulsions of Spanish Jews, whether actual (from Valmaseda in 1486) or planned (from Saragossa and Albarracín in the same year),<sup>54</sup> and Spanish Jewry's total expulsion in 1492, Spain indeed looks like a "Land of Persecution."<sup>55</sup> Yet if this characterization captures much that occurred to Jews and *conversos* during Abarbanel's Spanish sojourn, it does not reflect his own experience of Spain—not even as he himself recalled it after 1492.<sup>56</sup> Initially a welcome sanctuary for a fugitive from royal wrath, Spain quickly became Abarbanel's land of security and prosperity.

With a written appeal to João to "do justice" and permit his return to Portugal having fallen on deaf ears,<sup>57</sup> Abarbanel began to rebuild his life on Spanish soil. Records relate involvement in consequential financial affairs involving *conversos* in Ciudad Real as early as 1483. In spring of 1484, under circumstances none too clear, Abarbanel was summoned for an audience with Ferdinand and Isabella, after which he entered their service. In summer of the same year Joseph Abarbanel, like his father-in-law accused of complicity in machinations against João, joined Abarbanel in Castile. Gold, silver, and "monies and jewels" smuggled out of Portugal with the help of family members enhanced the pecuniary situation of Isaac and Joseph as they established themselves in the land of the Abarbanel family's original Iberian domicile.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the late 1480s, Abarbanel connections to Spain's upper echelons, Jewish and Christian, waxed significantly. By 1485, he had relocated to the Spanish heartland at Alcalá de Henares in order to oversee tax farming operations for Cardinal Mendoza, the "third king of Spain" (*tercer rey de las Españas*). Abarbanel continued in this role on a huge scale through at least 1488.<sup>59</sup> While undertaking new tax farming ventures in Requena and Atienza, he also supported the Spanish monarchs' Granada campaign, offering extensive loans. Work on behalf of Mendoza grandees continued, with Abarbanel eventually becoming chief paymaster to Cardinal Mendoza's affluent nephew, the duke of Infantado.<sup>60</sup> Though not well attested, links with wealthy court Jews and important *conversos* at court may be assumed. Outstanding among the former was Abraham Seneor, Castile's leading tax farmer, who since the late 1470s had stood at the summit of its Jewish *aljamas* (corporate communal bodies) as well. *Conversos* holding key posts included the royal secretaries Fernando Alvarez and Alfonso Avila, the comptroller of the treasury Luis de San-

tángel, and Aragon's vice-chancellor Alfonso de la Cavallería.<sup>61</sup> Abarbanel's association with at least one Jewish financier living in Aragon, Abraham Çarfati, is also attested.<sup>62</sup>

Personal good fortune notwithstanding, Abarbanel must have recognized that some events swirling about him augured badly for Judaism's future in the land of his ancestors. Like Abraham Seneor, he may have ransomed Jews taken captive during the ongoing conquest of Andalusian cities like Ronda and Málaga even as orders of expulsion were issued against other Hispano-Jewish communities.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, Spain saw a precipitous rise in the volume and intensity of anti-*converso* and anti-Jewish propaganda as the Inquisition implemented ever more brutal tactics culminating in the staged *Santo Niño de la Guardia* trial of 1490–91. Granada's fall in January 1492 and the triumphant royal entry into Islam's last Iberian citadel might also seem a glaring portent of Spanish Jewry's imminent demise, generating as it eventually would the first half of the inscription on the sepulcher of Abarbanel's royal employers: "Prostrating the Mahomedan sect and extinguishing heretical perversity."<sup>64</sup>

Yet if criticism of Abarbanel for failure to "grasp the developments of his time with a cold and piercing realistic view"<sup>65</sup> is easily made in retrospect, it is readily countered if the perspective of hindsight is abandoned. Persecution of *conversos* could seem a kind of divine retribution for those who had abandoned Judaism. The government's four-year renewal in 1491 of contracts with Jewish tax farmers, Abarbanel and Abraham Seneor included, spoke for itself.<sup>66</sup> In short, Abarbanel may have found little to disturb the idea that the "royal alliance" in which Spanish Jews had so long placed their trust—relying on courtiers like himself to provide the key link between monarch and Jewish community—was essentially healthy. He may even have celebrated Granada's fall, as did other Jews.<sup>67</sup>

However Abarbanel's lack of clairvoyance may be appraised, Ferdinand's and Isabella's signing of an order of expulsion against Jews in Spain and her possessions, on the grounds that the earlier Andalusian expulsion and Inquisition had failed to stem the perilous tide of *converso* backsliding, clearly took Abarbanel by surprise. The edict was promulgated in April 1492. Abarbanel's activities in its immediate aftermath are known largely on the basis of his own presumably self-serving accounts, though his efforts to collect outstanding debts appear from elsewhere.<sup>68</sup> Skepticism is surely in order, then, with regard to romanticized conjectures that, building on Abarbanel's depiction of his herculean endeavors to deliver Spanish Jewry, portray him speaking to Spain's queen "like a scion of the House of David and as a representative of an unconquered . . . people . . . like a prophet of old."<sup>69</sup> Yet even giving skepticism its due, one must reckon with Abarbanel's report of his appeals to leading Spanish nobles (his longtime employer Cardinal Mendoza no doubt among them) and his description of multiple encounters in which he claimed to have petitioned

Spain's king for his people's "salvation."<sup>70</sup> It seems rash, then, to insist on Abarbanel's complete passivity during Spanish Jewry's darkest hour and reasonable to affirm a link between his intercessory efforts (and those of others, to be sure) and the monthlong delay between the expulsion order's signing and promulgation, which is otherwise hard to explain.<sup>71</sup> In short, even on the low view that he "had no other interest than fame and fortune while in Spain,"<sup>72</sup> Abarbanel had every reason to want to see the expulsion decree revoked.

With Spanish Jewry's death knell having been sounded, grave concerns imposed themselves on Abarbanel and his family in the brief time given to Jews to convert or settle their affairs and leave. Beyond working to salvage some of his vast wealth, Abarbanel must have been concerned with the effects of a zealously mounted Christian missionizing effort,<sup>73</sup> of which his family was made a special target. Judah Abarbanel, his eldest son, got wind of a planned kidnapping and forced baptism of his own firstborn (named Isaac, in accordance with family tradition, after Judah's father). In a poem written a decade later and directed towards this son, Judah related how Spain's king ordered "that my child, still nursing, should be seized / and brought into his faith on his behalf."<sup>74</sup> The hope, it would seem, was to induce Judah and perhaps his father to convert and remain in Spain—a hope nourished, perhaps, by Abraham Seneor's conversion on June 15, with Spain's king and queen as sponsors and Cardinal Mendoza presiding, an event that brought an already demoralized Spanish Jewry into further despair.<sup>75</sup> Did the Abarbanels consider conversion? The curtain is drawn on their ruminations, but one may assume that Samuel Abarbanel's example figured in any thoughts they had along these lines.

As significant segments of Spanish Jewry elected to take on Christianity's trappings just prior to the deadline for departure, the Abarbanels, having elected to leave, faced a grave and complex question: where to flee? The main refugee destination, Portugal, was no option for one who stood convicted of a capital crime there. Abarbanel's grandson and namesake, however, was moved to Portugal, his grandfather's land of birth, for safekeeping, accompanied by "his wet-nurse in the dark of midnight just like smuggled goods," as Judah Abarbanel later lamented in the poem sent to the boy.<sup>76</sup> (When this line was penned in 1503, the Abarbanels would indeed have cause to lament the fate suffered by the young Isaac Abarbanel; for in 1497 the whole of Portuguese Jewry had been forcibly converted to Christianity, Judah's firstborn included.) The only other overland route, to the small Pyrenean kingdom of Navarre, was also rejected, perhaps because the Abarbanels sensed (rightly, as it would turn out) that this polity's days of independence were numbered.<sup>77</sup> So, in the summer of 1492, Abarbanel and his family found themselves bound for Italy, victims of what he called the "great and terrible destruction" of a "chosen" Jewry, the likes of which, he averred, "never there was before" nor would there be again.<sup>78</sup> With his departure from Spain, a long line of illustrious Ibero-Jewish

personalities who combined worldliness, royal service, and Jewish scholarship came to a woeful end.

In fall of 1492 the Abarbanel landed in “the renowned city of Naples,” capital of the southern Italian kingdom of the same name. The kingdom, held by Aragon since 1442, was Italy’s biggest state. An anonymous Jewish writer, possibly of Neapolitan origin, described Naples’ Ferrante I, a relative of Ferdinand the Catholic and “pivotal figure in the politics of late fifteenth-century Italy,”<sup>79</sup> as a “lover of the Jews.” This chronicler also reported that the new arrivals enjoyed a generally warm welcome from Jews, *conversos*, and Christians alike.<sup>80</sup> Still, Italy could seem a “sad epilogue” for the Spanish exiles, who now experienced persecutions from without and, from within, difficulties integrating into the foreign ways of a new Jewish community.<sup>81</sup> Then again, there were the memories of those “many,” as Abarbanel would recall, who had not made it intact: those who had traveled overland to Portugal and Navarre, only to perish of “famine and pestilence,” or those who, having set out to sea, were sold into slavery or drowned.<sup>82</sup> (Still others, having left loved ones behind in Spain, arrived in Naples only to experience a change of heart, receive baptism, and return home.)<sup>83</sup>

The aforementioned chronicler speaks of “esteem” won by Abarbanel in Ferrante’s eyes,<sup>84</sup> and a mid-sixteenth-century biographer, presumably relying on information supplied by Abarbanel’s middle son Joseph, tells of Ferrante bringing the erstwhile Spanish courtier immediately “into his chambers.”<sup>85</sup> Though Abarbanel never speaks of service to Ferrante, he does praise him as a “merciful king.”<sup>86</sup> By contrast, this king’s reputation among many in his own day (and not a few modern historians perhaps overly impressed by the propaganda of Ferrante’s enemies) was for a record of “subtle diplomacy, duplicity, and cruelty.”<sup>87</sup> Abarbanel also tells of wealth recouped in Italy and renewed fame “akin to that of all of the magnates in the land.”<sup>88</sup> Proof of his family’s quickly waxing fortunes lies in the offer of citizenship and all attendant privileges extended to Judah Abarbanel in July 1494 by Ferrante’s unpopular successor Alfonso II. Abarbanel’s son, so described (*Jude abramenel ebrei filii don isac abramanel*), was apparently here representing the larger Abarbanel family, including, naturally, his father.<sup>89</sup> As events following Charles VIII’s invasion of Naples for the purpose of pressing an Angevin claim to the Neapolitan crown show, the Abarbanel’s closeness to Alfonso was unsurpassed. Reviled and already facing the ruin of his house, the king abdicated and fled to Sicily with Isaac Abarbanel at his side. Abarbanel’s swift rise to Italian prominence is, then, indisputable.

And yet one is hard-pressed to chart Abarbanel’s pathway to near-immediate distinction in Italy. True, as has been observed, he had had Italian business contacts while still in Portugal. And it is possible that, despite the death of Yehiel da Pisa in 1490, Abarbanel renewed acquaintances with his son Isaac after 1492. (Among other things, Isaac occupied himself with the ransoming of

Spanish exiles during this time.)<sup>90</sup> Then, too, Ferrante had supported at least one Jewish scholar in the past, Abraham de Balmes, although such interest as he had in Abarbanel was apparently tied less to his scholarship than to his potential contributions to various royal initiatives designed to revive Naples's economy.<sup>91</sup> Finally, one should note the Neapolitan state's Aragonese connection. Abarbanel would not have been the only figure active in late-fifteenth-century Italy who was well seasoned in the ways of the pan-Mediterranean world. But even if one deems Abarbanel such an "*homme sans frontières*,"<sup>92</sup> and adds in such partial explanations as have just been mentioned, his meteoric Neapolitan rise to prominence remains a bit mysterious.

Abarbanel spent the first half of 1495 in various locales in Sicily (Mazzara, Palermo, Messina), an Aragonese dominion that had expelled its Jews over two years earlier,<sup>93</sup> where he monitored events as a "holy league" of Italian and foreign powers led by Spain was formed to oust the French from Italy. He probably had at least a passing acquaintance from bygone days with the commander of the expeditionary force dispatched by King Ferdinand, the Castilian noble Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba. Both Abarbanel's eldest son and his nephew would be associated with this soon-to-be illustrious Spanish general in the years after he had won lasting fame in Italy under the title "*el gran capitán*." Even as Gonzalo and the Holy League compelled a French retreat, however, Alfonso's place was usurped by his son Ferrandino (Ferrante II). Though Aragonese-Neapolitan power began to reassert itself northwards, Abarbanel headed east for Corfu.

Under Venetian control and possessed of a mixed Greek and Italian Jewish population, the island of Corfu had swelled with Spanish refugees after 1492, most seeking an outlet to the Levant.<sup>94</sup> Now Abarbanel—conscious of having grown up at the world's western edge, whence he had moved ever further east—also disembarked there with the idea of making his way to Turkish lands. This plan to leave Christian Europe forever he later ascribed to "the weight of the war."<sup>95</sup> The few books that had "escaped the hands of robbers" during Naples's sack were forwarded to Solonika, a major center of settlement for the Spanish refugees. Here Abarbanel's son Samuel was already resident, studying in the main rabbinic academy established by the exiles under the leadership of Joseph Fasi.<sup>96</sup> Though Abarbanel never made it to Ottoman territory, many members of his extended family did. Acting in concert with the family's Italian branch, they would serve as intermediaries between east and west for decades to come.<sup>97</sup>

Though in Naples Abarbanel had been prayerful that God would allow those who had "walked in darkness" finally to see light,<sup>98</sup> little time was required to see that this prayer had been roundly rejected. The outbreak of plague soon after the arrival of the Spanish and Sicilian refugees was a bad omen; the physically weakened newcomers succumbed to the pestilence in especially large

numbers. Worse yet, Jews were blamed for the scourge's arrival, with royal intervention being required to protect them from the inevitable results of such accusations.<sup>99</sup> The refugees' economic condition was generally dire. Following Alfonso's abdication, parliament resolved to expel most Jews from Naples while applying stringent anti-Jewish measures to the remainder. The kingdom's Jews suffered ferocious attacks and despoliation at the hands of the local populace. The French soldiery soon joined in.<sup>100</sup> Abarbanel later described in larmoyant terms the captivity and murder of Naples's Jews and their conversion to Christianity in large numbers.<sup>101</sup>

At the onset of 1496, Abarbanel found himself back on the Italian mainland, his plans to move to the "abode of Islam"—for reasons that remain opaque to the historian—abandoned. Monopoli, an Adriatic seaport recently drawn under Venetian rule that remained in the shadow of French military superiority, was Abarbanel's new home, or at least current place of residence. Abarbanel felt feeble and devoid of spiritual momentum as, now approaching his seventh decade, he again contemplated reconstruction of his life in the wake of personal misfortune and communal catastrophe. As occurred following his escapes from Portugal in 1483 and Spain in 1492, Abarbanel's experience of traumatic circumstances again generated a cathartic outpouring of autobiographical exposition.<sup>102</sup> Never was his mood more brooding or his literary timbre more tenebrous.<sup>103</sup>

Looking beyond his personal situation, Abarbanel found cause for deeper despair. The community of Spanish exiles (and, perhaps, segments of the larger Italian Jewish community) seemed to him in a state of pervasive spiritual decadence. To be sure, "fate," so filled with "the tribulations of expulsion," was largely to blame. Still, it was painful to see people of distinction neglecting eternal life in their pursuit of temporal affairs: money, comforts, and even such sinful activities as gambling. Others engaged in all manner of frivolous conduct. None regarded "God's work . . . , the gift of His Torah." Only glowing reports from far off Solonika of the sterling character (treating "time's vanities as naught") and intellectual achievements (pursuing wisdom with a "discerning" heart) of Abarbanel's youngest son provided relief.<sup>104</sup>

A passage in Abarbanel's commentary on the Passover Haggadah, composed soon after arrival in Monopoli, attests to the untold depths of religious despair into which many had fallen. In a phrase that appeared in the psalms of praise recited as part of the Haggadah, "I said in my haste all men are liars" (Ps. 116:11), Abarbanel saw a reference to

the suffering of exile and its agonies<sup>105</sup> . . . [meaning] that then during the period of redemption when I will be free I will recollect how I would say in those days [of exile]: "all men are liars (*kol ha-'adam kozev*)"—that is, all the prophets that prophesied regarding my redemption and salvation, all were

liars. . . . Moses with his promises a liar, Isaiah with his words of comfort a liar, Jeremiah and Ezekiel with their prophecies liars and so too all of the prophets—  
“all men are liars.”<sup>106</sup>

If failures of faith were hardly unknown in the oppressive religious atmosphere of pre-1492 Spain, expressions of religious disbelief in Italy had become, if anything, still more more pained and, at times, defiant: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—liars! To be sure, these words placed in the mouth of the Passover ceremony's participant lose much of their sting when placed in their exegetical context within the Haggadah: the now redeemed participant extols God while recollecting his ultimately misguided sense of betrayal in exile. Placed within the historical context in which Abarbanel devised this interpretation, however, the words betoken the serious spiritual doubts of many of his coreligionists—doubts that in some cases had hardened into resolute religious cynicism.<sup>107</sup> Abarbanel himself was by no means immune to feelings of disillusionment, as when he contrasted Passovers past surrounded by family, people of learning, and the indigent who frequented his table, with his current dire situation.<sup>108</sup>

Abarbanel's ventures in and around Monopoli and Barletta, a seaport situated some sixty miles to the north, are scarcely attested, if one discounts a spate of literary productivity that dwarfed all that had come before and that is by any measure astounding.<sup>109</sup> The only basis for reconstruction of this interval in Abarbanel's worldly affairs is a royal order of 10 May 1501, in which Ferrante I's second son (and successor to Ferrante II), Federigo, enjoins the Barletta authorities to aid in every way the “esteemed Isaac Abarbanel and Master Leon [Judah] the physician, his son” as they implement plans to return with their families to the city of Naples for the purpose of engaging in royal service.<sup>110</sup> One of the king's remarks suggests that Abarbanel may have been in Barletta for some time by this point,<sup>111</sup> just as the king's description of him as “dear” to him indicates a long-standing relationship, suggesting perhaps that Abarbanel was already involved in royal service in Barletta. This conjecture would also account for his otherwise unexplained move to Barletta and the plans to uproot again to Naples: having been called to service in the eastern part of Federigo's kingdom, Abarbanel was now repairing to the capital to serve the monarch at closer range.<sup>112</sup> Favorable to his Jewish population generally, Federigo was clearly supportive of the Abarbanels.<sup>113</sup>

It seems unlikely that the Abarbanels ever returned to the capital. The main obstacle was an endlessly complex series of negotiations, battles, and broken treaties that bestowed upon Italy the dubious honor that it would hold for decades of being Latin Christendom's battlefield of choice. The Venetians, who had fought the Turks from 1463 to 1479, now engaged in renewed struggle with the Ottoman enemy, while Gonzalo de Córdoba redeployed to Sicily and

conquered Cephalonia from the Turks in 1500 (receiving a visit soon thereafter from Abarbanel's nephew Joseph).<sup>114</sup> In the same year, France and Spain acted on an agreement to partition Naples; French artillery occupied the capital by August 1501. Though the Abarbanels' whereabouts for the year and a half following Naples's fall are unknown, there is reason to believe their fortune was tied to Gonzalo's exploits. Having vanquished Naples, the Spanish and French found themselves again at odds, with Barletta serving as Gonzalo's base in the subsequent battle. There he remained through April of 1503 until his victory at Cerignola assured Spain's triumph and emergence as a great expansionist European power. Throughout this time, Isaac and Judah Abarbanel probably remained in Barletta. Evidence that their relationship with Gonzalo ripened at this point lies in Judah's summons to Gonzalo's service soon thereafter. Other Abarbanels would remain involved in affairs in and around Naples during Gonzalo's tenure as Spanish viceroy, beginning in 1504.<sup>115</sup>

Sometime around 1503, Isaac Abarbanel moved to "the great city of Venice,"<sup>116</sup> the northernmost European center he would ever know. At the time, the Venetian *terra firma* (mainland territories across the lagoon from the city proper) possessed a tiny and precariously situated Jewish community connected with various economic interests, but Jewish residence in Venice itself was officially barred (as it had been throughout the late Middle Ages except for a short interval between 1382 and 1397).<sup>117</sup> In assessing this move to so small and inhospitable a Jewish domain, it seems helpful to recall that Abarbanel had often lived at a remove from intense Jewish communal life, most notably during his time spent in Sicily as the island's sole professing Jew. Abarbanel was used to living mainly among Christians, and was apparently content to do so.

There are other possible explanations for the move to Venice. Assuming it could be verified, the antecedent presence there of Abarbanel's middle son, Joseph, would obviously be among the most important.<sup>118</sup> Abarbanel might also have felt that Jewish life in Venice was on an upswing despite restrictive and antagonistically worded legislation passed against Jews and *conversos* as recently as 1496–97. At the beginning of 1503 an "extremely liberal" ten-year charter was granted to three Jewish loan banks that, among other things, permitted their operators to rent houses in Venice proper and conduct religious activities within city limits, albeit not to establish a synagogue.<sup>119</sup> When all is said and done, however, Abarbanel's motive for moving to Venice remains elusive, notwithstanding his long-standing admiration for the republic of which this city was the heart.<sup>120</sup>

In 1503, Venice was on the defensive. A treaty relinquishing key territories to the Turks had just been signed, and Venice's enmeshment in the French-Spanish wrangle entailed considerable costs to her army and trade. Economic threats also loomed large. Long a critical entrepôt between east and west, Venice was beginning to feel the effects of Portugal's circumnavigation of Africa

and Vasco da Gama's successful voyage to Calicut. Supplies of pepper and other condiments from the east were now reaching the Mediterranean without Venice serving as their way station.<sup>121</sup> As Venetian patricians sought to avert a financial disaster, Abarbanel developed a plan that he presented to the Council of Ten, volunteering his nephew as an emissary to the Portuguese. In August 1503, with plan and offer accepted, the Council assured Abarbanel of the state's "customary gratitude" should all go well.<sup>122</sup>

Abarbanel's effort at international diplomacy has been linked to the fate of his grandson, who, it will be recalled, had been sent for safekeeping to Portugal in 1492 only to fall victim to Portuguese Jewry's mass forced conversion in 1497. The Abarbanels had recently suffered a grievous blow: the death of this son's younger brother, the second of Judah Abarbanel's "splendid sons," at age five. No doubt Judah's father shared his eldest son's sorrow at the loss of this "precious, noble, handsome" child.<sup>123</sup> In 1503 Judah addressed a lament to the firstborn son, who was then approaching his Jewish majority, in which he reminded the boy of his heritage, beginning with the fact that he had been named "after the quarry where I myself was hewn." Judah's poem indicates that this son, although living as a Christian, was receiving a Jewish education.<sup>124</sup> His heartrending missive also implies an expectation that this son would be able to read his words. The proposal of Judah's father to send an Abarbanel as Venice's emissary to Portugal might have nurtured this hope and, possibly, plans for the boy's escape.<sup>125</sup> Whether young Isaac Abarbanel ever returned to his family or to open profession and practice of Judaism is unknown.<sup>126</sup>

Judah's poem, as it discloses a deep sense of guilt over his son's fate and reveals upheavals (including a ruptured marriage) occasioned by the "loss" of his child,<sup>127</sup> conveys filial piety as well. Who, asks Judah, will perpetuate his own learning and "penetrate the mysteries my father put into his sacred books" if not his child now entrapped as "a pure soul lost among the nations, a rose among the desert thorns and weeds"?<sup>128</sup> Invoking an old topos of Hispano-Jewish poetry, Judah ascribes his learning to a combination of his own efforts and that which "my own father bequeathed to me."<sup>129</sup> Like his father, who was quick to celebrate his conjoint scholarly and this-worldly achievements, Judah viewed his erudition with more than a little self-regard. For his part, Abarbanel nonchalantly (but with more than a hint of fatherly pride) informed Saul Hakohen that Judah was "undoubtedly the most accomplished philosopher in Italy in this generation."<sup>130</sup>

The year 1505 saw a milestone in the history of the "sacred books" of his father to which Judah referred: three were printed in Constantinople, making them among the first to be published by the budding Hebrew press there. As this press sought to produce a series of major works that would abet efforts to transplant Iberian learning to new Sefardic centers, the turn to Abarbanel

underscores his stature in what was now a major Jewish scholarly hub. Judah Abarbanel composed prefatory poems for the works to honor the occasion.<sup>131</sup>

Whether Abarbanel ever handled his printed writings is unclear, but he knew of their existence<sup>132</sup> and was certainly attuned to the new technology that had produced them. Jews in the three centers where Abarbanel passed his life were in the forefront of those who employed “the newly-invented art of Gutenberg for the production of Hebrew books.”<sup>133</sup> Lisbon and Guadalajara, where Abarbanel spent his Portuguese years and many of his Spanish ones, were among the first locales to see the transition from manually to mechanically produced Hebrew books,<sup>134</sup> while Hebrew printing in southern Italy predated Abarbanel’s arrival there by nearly two decades. The existence of Hebrew printing in Naples is first attested in a notarial act of 1487. (Anti-Jewish works were churned out by Naples’s Latin printing press at around the same time.) And the famed Hebrew press of the Soncinos moved to Naples three years before Abarbanel did. By 1492 the city was also a major center of Latin and Italian printing, and its Hebrew printing press remained active throughout Abarbanel’s sojourn there.<sup>135</sup> Abarbanel’s closing years were spent in the proximity of Venice’s famed Aldine press, which from the 1490s on had been churning out a variety of Greek and Latin works in a “radically and provocatively innovative” way.<sup>136</sup> When Abarbanel arrived in Venice, the city was already Europe’s preeminent publishing center.

As he wrote Saul Hakohen two years prior to his death, Abarbanel was in the grips of debilitating old age, his hands “heavy,” his eyes having “lost their light.”<sup>137</sup> Saul had asked whether Abarbanel might consider a move to the Holy Land, in which case, if he passed through Crete, they could meet “face-to-face.”<sup>138</sup> Abarbanel’s loss of vigor and the severe difficulties entailed by such a trip and life in the Land of Israel under Mamluk rule must have made the proposition seem curious to Abarbanel, at best.<sup>139</sup> He did not, at any rate, deign to reply.

According to his earliest biographer, Isaac Abarbanel died in Venice around the winter of 1508–09, whence he was brought to Padua for burial, mourned by Jewish and Venetian eminences alike.<sup>140</sup> An elegy composed upon his decease, perhaps by a grieving Judah, lauds one “whose doings were wondrous in our religion.”<sup>141</sup> With a synopsis of Abarbanel’s life and contexts in hand, we turn now to his scholarly and literary doings, seen in terms of the extraordinary number and diversity of figures, intellectual streams, and controversies that stimulated and informed them.