Dissertation #11

Title: R. Obadja Sforno als Exeget (On R. Obadjah Sforno as a Biblical Exegete)

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Executive Summary: The discipline that this dissertation belongs to is the history of philosophy. Its author - a graduate of the positive-historial

Introduction (pp. i)

In the introduction, the author situates his dissertation as being part of a then-existing wave of academic interest in (Jewish) Biblical exegesis and promises to publish another work on R. Obadja Sforno as a philosopher.

The Life of R. Obadjah Sforno (pp. 1 - 14)

This first chapter contains an overview of R. Obadjah Sforno's biography, followed by some remarks on his "character" on pp. 11 - 14.

Starting with an in-depth study of various spellings and variants of Obadja Sforno's name (citing primary sources from the period in question, then-contemporary Jewish Studies scholarship and even contacting the Italian-Jewish scholar Marco Mortara, 1815-1894, for the etymology of "Sforno" which the latter was unable to provide, though), the introduction then deals with the many incertitudes surrounding his life: born in Cesena in North-Eastern Italy between 1468 - 1473 (as the author concludes based on sources related to Sforno's relationship with the humanist scholar Johan Reuchlin), almost nothing is positively known about his education and his academic path - this can, so the author, only be inferred from an analysis of Sforno's works. According to the author, Sforno was familiar with Talmudic and Halakhic knowledge, as well as with medicine, philosophy, mathematics and philology; he was proficient in Latin and knew Arabic but favored Hebrew most. He was considered both a medical and a Talmudic-Halakhic authority (as the author shows quoting from responsa by the Italian rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen). What little can be ascertained about the outer circumstances of Sforno's life (especially from his letters) the author tries to list, e.g. him being a citizen of Bologna, often facing material hardships or the fact that it was the influence of his brother that made him turn to Biblical exegesis. Judging by circumstantial evidence, Sforno must have lived uninterruptedly in Rome from 1496 to around 1525, but of his students in Rome - apart from Johann Reuchlin - only R. Elia ben Josef de Nola is known by name. Later on, Sforno moved to Bologna where he first started to practice as a physician (according to the author who relies on Sforno not having been called a doctor during his Roman period). In Bologna, he was also an influential Jewish community leader and prolific preacher. King Henry II of France highly regarded and supported Sforno as is evidenced by dedication letters to both Sforno's Ecclesiastes commentary and to the Latin translation of his philosophical work Or Ammim. Sforno died in 1550 in Bologna.

In the author's view that is based on passages in Sforno's letters (reprinted in the appendix to the dissertation), the character of Sforno was marked by reverence for his father and his brother, a deep religiosity (expressing itself in messianic hopes), observance of the Halakhic commandments without excessive stringency and by a universalist orientation that showed itself in his belief that all nations are to be seen as divine property, in the respect he paid to Christians whom he taught Hebrew or in the name and content of his philosophical work *Or Amim* ("a light for the nations").

II. The Writings of Obadja Sforno (pp. 15 - 40)

This chapter is made up of the author's summary of all writings by Obadja Sforno, not just the exegetical ones, which are introduced using their Hebrew titles. It is meant to be an improvement upon older bibliographies and overviews made by both Christian and Jewish scholars (the author Jacques Basnage, Julius Fürst and others).

1. *Beur le-sefer euklides* (p. 15): only a very short description of this "translation of Euclides' eighth books from Arabic into Hebrew", mentioning its existence as a manuscript in the Parisian *Bibliotheque du Roi* and its time and place of publication (1520-5 in Rome), is provided by the author.

2. *Or 'Amim* (pp. 16 - 18): a religio-philosophical treatise aiming at refuting several Aristotelian doctrines and at defending core principles of monotheistic creeds. It is made up of an introduction in which Sforno gives an overview of the history of philosophy and of 15 chapters each dedicated to a different core issue pertaining to the philosophy of religion: e.g. "Is the material world eternal?" (chapter 1), "Is there only one eternal being that created everything?" (chapter 8), "Is the individual and rational human soul immortal?" (chapter 12). The work was published in Bologna in 1537 in Hebrew. A Latin translation, made by Sforno himself, is available as a manuscript in the library of the Friars Minor in Reggio Emilia. The author considers this book to have been written before Sforno's exegetical works.

3. *Beur 'al ha-torah* (p. 19): A commentary on the Pentateuch used, so the author, as "a favorite means of study by the thinking and cultured (*gebildete)* Jews in Russia, Poland, and Galicia." It is treated in detail further below in the dissertation.

4. *Kavanot ha-torah* (pp. 19 - 21): a treatise on the goals and aims of Biblical law and lore. In Sforno's view - so the author - the purpose of the holy scripture is to turn the Israelite people into a divine-like entity. The theoretical-narrative part of the Bible has the objective of convincing humanity of G'd's existence and instilling both the fear of G'd and a charitable sense towards other humans in it. This goal is further enhanced by the practical-normative part that aims at making mankind and, above all, the Jewish nation reach it through the observance of the divine commandments which, so Sforno, are all meant to remind the believers of the divine covenant (e.g. by circumcision) or to benefit them in other ways (e.g. dietary laws are seen as improving human health). The author provides further details on the content of this book.

5. *Beur shir ha-shirim* (pp. 21 - 23): an allegorical commentary on the *Song of Songs* which Sforno reads as a dialogue between the people of Israel and G'd. According to the author, the scholarly value of this commentary is insignificant despite occasional appealing explanations and interpretations.

6. *Beur kohelet* (pp. 23 - 26): a commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, whose ultimate aim Sforno characterizes as counseling the reader to surpass the vanities of this world through Torah study and virtuous conduct. According to the author, this commentary - marked by a concise and clear style, but tainted by occasional allegorizing or mystical readings - contains many important insights, but is unable to offer a convincing explanation for the overall structure of the work and the connection between its various parts.

7. *Mishpat tzedek* (pp. 26 - 34): a commentary on the *Book of Job*, whose content the author describes in much detail in chronological order. It consists of an introduction that summarizes *Job*'s goal as providing a proof of the creation of the world by G'd, of divine providence and of the possibility to attain eternal life. This is followed by a comprehensive recapitulation of the speeches of the various *dramatis personae* of this book.

8. *Beur 'al sefer ha-tehilim* (pp. 34 - 37): a commentary on the Psalms. According to Sforno, their purpose is to lead those who study them towards eternal eudaimonia and eternal life by becoming similar to their creator via the acknowledgement of G'd's greatness and goodness. Sforno, so the author, divides the Psalms into five parts: 1. hymns to the creator; 2. prayers for the Sons of Korah and for David; 3. prayers of thanksgiving; 4. confessional prayers; 5. hymns depicting and praising the messianic age. However, Sforno acknowledges that this division should not be applied strictly and dogmatically, with several psalms not fitting it completely.

9. *Beur Yona, Habakkuk ve-Zachariah* (pp. 37): a commentary on the books of Jonah, Habakkuk and Zechariah seen by the author as defective and fragmentary.

10. *Perush 'al pirkei avot* (pp. 38 - 39): a commentary on the Mishnaic tractate *Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers"), probably written during Sforno's stay in Rome (1496 - 1525). The commentary provides the guiding principle behind every of the book's chapters except for the sixth and last one.

11. *Sefer dikduk leshon 'ivri* (p. 39): a grammar of the Hebrew language with an accompanying Latin translation. It is, so the author, mentioned in one of Sforno's letters to his brother but has been lost since.

11. Responsa and smaller treatises on subjects as, e.g., dreams, the blessings and curses on Mt Sinai etc.; sermons and a work on the coins appearing in the Talmud. The author also mentions that *contra* Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi and Julius Fürst, Sforno did not write commentaries on the later prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel) or on additional books of the Bible.

III. The editions of Sforno's exegetical works (pp. 41 - 44)

In this chapter, the author gives an overview over all the printed editions of the eight exegetical works written by Sforno, bemoaning the lack of critical editions and missing references to chapter/verse of the quotations cited.

IV. Sources of Sforno's Biblical Interpretation. (pp. 45 - 52)

Here the author shows the sources that stood at Sforno's disposal and the level and content of the education he received based on an analysis of his commentaries (the footnotes are full with references to passages in the writings of Sforno meant to prove those claims).

According to the author, Sforno was highly conversant with the Hebrew Bible himself and its Palestinian and Babylonian *Targumim*, classical rabbinic literature (though not the Jerusalem Talmud which he, so the author, likely only knew from secondary sources) and medieval rabbinic exegetes (whom Sforno, however, never explicitly cites with the exception of Nachmanides). The only non-Jewish author certainly known to Sforno was the 3rd century BCE Greek-writing Babylonian historian Berossus. Sforno's familiarity with religious philosophy is not examined in this dissertation, though.

V. The Character of Sforno's Exegetical Works (pp. 53 - 80)

Describing the nature of his Biblical exegesis - so the author - is more difficult with regard to Sforno than with regard to other Jewish commentators (like Rashi or ibn Ezra) who explicitly announced to their readers what approach of interpretation (e.g., literal or allegorical) they intended to adopt in their works. Sforno, however, never wrote about methodological issues. Moreover, he preferred different approaches in various works, for example going for allegorical interpretation in his commentary on the Psalms while favoring a philosophizing exegesis of Genesis and a literal one for most of the rest of the Pentateuch. All in all, the literal approach was dominant. Though without disregarding the Talmudic-midrashic tradition of interpretation, especially in as far as questions of Jewish law were concerned.

In the view of the author, Sforno wrote primarily for an advanced audience already familiar with more basic commentaries and interested in elucidating obscure passages. He focused on the meaning of whole passages, and rarely dealt with individual words or grammatical questions presupposing a firm understanding on the part of his readers in that regard.

Sforno's overarching goal was, according to the author who quotes from the introduction to the Pentateuch commentary, to defend both Judaism and the Bible, showing it as a cohesive expression of divine greatness and goodness. The Biblical narrative itself is for Sforno characterized by constant human rebellion against the divine order which is, however, again and again ultimately met by mercy on the part of G'd.

It follows a section on aspects of Sforno's "simple" Biblical exegesis and preference for the *Pshat* (i.e. the plain meaning of the text).

First (subsections A and B, pp. 61 - 69), Sforno tried to constantly portray the Biblical text as a reasonably structured coherent whole, trying to account for apparent insertions or breaks in the

narrative, as the author illustrates by detailing many different explanations given by Sforno in his commentary on the Pentateuch. In exceptional cases (subsection C, p. 69) Sforno claims - following Talmudic sayings - that the narrative put forward in the Bible is not arranged in chronological order but according to importance with the more important event being told before the less important one, even if the latter happened before the former. In the next subsection (subsection D, pp. 69 - 72), Sforno's tendency to resolve logical contradictions is shown by giving several examples such as the explanation of why Jacob was still referred to by this name in the Bible even after he had already received the name Israel (because at that time, so Sforno, it was only prophesied to Jacob that he would be called Israel later on, i.e. after the fulfillment of the Jewish people's mission). Apart from resolving contradictions, his commentaries also aimed at calling attention to easily overlooked details (subsection E, pp. 72-3) or elucidating the reason for repetitions (subsection F, pp. 73-4). Sforno also did not shy away from deviating from the punctuation of the Masoretes (subsection G, pp. 74-5). Sometimes etymological analyses (subsection H, p. 75) or counterintuitive ways of resolving a verse's syntax (subsection I, pp. 75 - 78) are supplied by Sforno. Finally (subsection J, pp. 78-9), a few difficult passages are explicated through the assumption that a part of a sentence was deliberately missing (aposiopesis).

VI. Language-Related Issues (pp. 80 - 104)

Even though, as has already been said, Sforno's commentaries did not focus on linguistic issues, they nevertheless also contained grammatical and lexical elucidations. With regard to grammar, the author gives examples of remarks helping to understand the morphology of nouns and verbs, the syntax of a sentence, and the meaning of grammatical particles. For instance, Sforno is quoted as explaining that the term כספיהם in *Genesis (Bereshit)* 42, 25 must be translated as silver coins and not as a non-existent plural form of silver. As to lexicographical remarks, the author furnishes an alphabetical glossary of a large selection of words paraphrased by Sforno (pp. 87 - 102), in which it says, for example, that the verb לדעת (usually signifying "to know, understand") could also mean "to care for something" in the book of Job. This is followed by a short list of "synonyms" (pp. 103-4), or rather closely related word pairs, for which Sforno provides a distinction with respect to nuances of meanings: the concept גוי is explained as a religious community and contrasted with לאום which is said to be a national and political unit, ארץ is the whole body of the earth whereas תבל refers to its inhabited parts only etc.

VII. The Form of Sforno's Exegetical Works (pp. 105 - 106)

Sforno's commentaries, so the author, follow the chronological order of the verses in the commented text and start with highlighting the words that are meant to be explained, almost always without referring positively or negatively to earlier commentators. At times, his elucidations also provide geographical, historical, physical or medical information helpful for grasping a passage's meaning. Concerning their style, his works are succinct and without embellishments but not devoid of all elegance.

VIII. Others on Obadjah Sforno (pp. 107 - 110)

In this last chapter, the author gives an overview of the reception of Sforno by subsequent scholars in chronological order. The author mentions as readers and beneficiaries (giving references to passages in those writers' books testifying to Sforno's influence), sometimes providing further information on their views on Sforno: the Roman rabbi Elia Nola (16th century), Azariah dei Rossi (1511 - 1578), the rabbi and naturalist Josef Salomo del Medigo (born 1591) who recommended Sforno's philosophical works, the rabbi Lippmann Yom Tov Heller (1579 - 1654) who spoke positively of Sforno in his Mishna commentary, the British orientalist Edmund Castell (1606–1686), the rabbi and Torah commentator Jacob Abendana (1630 - 1685), the Jerusalemite scholar Chaim Yosef David Azulay (1724 - 1806) who considered Sforno to be one of the major exegetes favoring the literal approach, the "Biurist" circle of Moses Mendelssohn, the Italian rabbi and historian Mordecai Ghirondi (1799 - 1852) who saw Sforno as an excellent commentator surpassing all his predecessors in terms of precision and succinctness, the Protestant Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch (1813-90) for whom Sforno was among Jewish commentators exceptional for not giving in to mysticism, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 - 1888), the German-Jewish scholar David Joel (1815-82), the historian Heinrich Zvi Graetz (1817-91) who was dismissive of Sforno viewing him as lacking familiarity with Hebrew literature, the German Jewish

historian Gustav Karpeles (1848 - 1909) who praised the Sforno's commentary on the book of Job, the German rabbi and theologian Fabian Feilchenfeld (1827 - 1910) who called Sforno a very insightful exegete and the American rabbi Benjamin Szold (1829 - 1902) whose own commentary on the Book of Job greatly drew on Sforno's groundwork.

Appendix

This appendix contains various previously unpublished letters and responsa of Sforno's in Hebrew, copied by the author from manuscripts.