

# Video Clip: Abraham ibn Ezra

## The Wandering Sage

Abraham ibn Ezra was one of the most famous biblical commentators, and one of the more controversial Jewish thinkers. He was a European wanderer, Biblical commentator and noted scientist.

### Suggested Implementations

#### Philosophy

1. Rationalism and fatalism vs. esoteric
2. Analyzing poetry
3. Conversion

#### TaNakh

1. An introduction to the commentary of ibn Ezra

#### History/Science

1. Astronomy and astrology
2. The astrolabe

### Background

Born in Christian Spain in the city of Tudela in (approximately) 1089 he lived to the age of 75, having passed away in the year 1164. Ibn Ezra was an exceptional autodidact, claiming his fame primarily through biblical exegesis but was also a very talented grammarian at a time when studies in Hebrew grammar were flourishing. Most of all, though, ibn Ezra was a brilliant poet, a valued career option in Spain.

Born at the same time and place as Yehuda HaLevy, it is no wonder that he began to write poetry. Poetry was so beloved in this Spanish Golden Age that everyone in his own way was an amateur poet, including merchants and warriors. It was an outlet to demonstrate intelligence, creativity, and sensitivity. In Spain, patrons paid for Abraham ibn Ezra's needs, allowing him to write. Very wealthy Spaniards would commission him to write poems for their family, to laud their exploits, or to write insulting poems where he would decry their enemies. This is how he made his living. But it was also a format for him to express his Judaism - as is seen by his poem "Ki Eshmera Shabbat."

He typically wrote in Judeo-Arabic or Hebrew. Originally, he wrote his commentaries, etc. in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic, but all those writings are lost to us today. Hebrew, for ibn Ezra, was reserved for poetry, until he spent time in Europe (Rome, Provence, throughout Italy) and developed strong Hebrew linguistic skills, ultimately switching all his writing to Hebrew.

He moved to Muslim Spain's Andalusia, to Granada and possibly Cordoba as well, for the more open environment. However, in the 1140s he was driven out of Andalusia. Many assume he fled because of

the growing influence of a radical Islamic regime, the Almohads, over his hometown<sup>1</sup>, although others say he may have set out for financial reasons. In Europe, he wrote “Lament for Andalusian Jewry.”

Ibn Ezra’s son, Yitzhak, married Yehuda HaLevy’s daughter. Yitzhak was a poet as well and travelled to Egypt with Yehudah HaLevy at one point. While there, instead of continuing on to the Land of Israel with his father-in-law, or returning home to his wife and son, Yitzhak converted to Islam. Abraham ibn Ezra wrote two poems expressing his grief over his son.

Ibn Ezra traveled around the known world, from Spain he moved to Rome, Provence, Tunis, and England in addition to Babylonia, Persia, the Land of Israel, India, and parts of Africa. Because of his acumen for languages, he eked out a living based on his knowledge of Hebrew grammar. He explained to Jews in Christian lands what Hebrew terms mean and the grammatical structure of the Torah itself. Ibn Ezra wrote many commentaries on the Bible as well as treatises on secular topics. It was in Italy that he began writing his commentaries and philosophy in Hebrew as the Jews there did not speak Arabic. However, throughout his travels, he was always looking for a consistent patron.

As a genius scholar with wide ranging knowledge, he was sought out by the highly educated. However, those were not the people who had money, and therefore he lived in extreme poverty. Much of his poetry is also quite fatalistic in which he talks about how the stars are not aligned for him and he is doomed to fail at any business endeavor. He would often have to write his commentaries several times, because he would sell his originals and then, to sell more copies, he would have to write the same ideas down again from memory. There are several versions, shorter and longer, of his commentaries. Even today, there exist two parallel commentaries of his on Genesis, Exodus, the Minor Prophets, Psalms, Song of Songs, Esther, and Daniel. He himself noted that he was not a businessman, and was known for his poor appearance. His best-selling writings of his time were his scientific writings, including “Sefar Ha-Moladot”. As he said, “if I were a hat salesman, people would be born without heads. If I were a shrine salesman, nobody would die.”

Ibn Ezra was a great rationalist. He believed very deeply that the Torah had to make sense and he refused to succumb to mystical interpretations of the Bible. He was very skeptical of Midrashic Torah interpretations, rejecting it as a misunderstanding of the text’s actual meaning. Ibn Ezra wanted to formulate his own interpretation by staying within the text, as he thought Midrash steered away from the words themselves. For this reason, he called his commentary on the *Humash* “Sefer HaYashar,” meaning straightforward, i.e. *peshat*.

This was his introduction:

*This is Sefer ha-Yashar  
By Abraham the poet;  
It is bound by the cords of grammar  
And approved by the eye of reason;  
Happy are those who adhere to it.*

Abraham Geiger and Barukh Spinoza both lauded ibn Ezra as a strong scholar, while ibn Ezra is studied in the strictest Yeshivot to this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Saadia Gaon and Abraham Ibn Ezra and Their Defense of the Written and Oral Torah: Fighting over the Bible: Jewish interpretation, sectarianism and polemic from temple to talmud and beyond

He was a true scientist who brought the Andalusian science heritage to the greater world throughout his travels. Among other books, he wrote a guide to the astrolabe. Many centuries later, when they were charting the craters on the moon, his work was recognized. Abenezra is a lunar impact crater located in the rugged highlands in the south-central section of the moon named after Ibn Ezra.

Ibn Ezra accepted miracles philosophically, as after all, it was obvious and natural to him that God performs miracles. But while he believed that God split the Red Sea, he tended to diminish other miracles that commentators attributed to God at that time. While on the one hand, Ibn Ezra could indeed be very radical in his approach, he could, on the other hand, be very traditional. For example, while several medieval scholars said that *Kohelet* was written years after King Solomon, the traditional writer ascribed to the text, Ibn Ezra was adamant that the writer was indeed Solomon.

Ibn Ezra also famously defended the authority of the Oral Tradition against Karaite attack. Although he himself was skeptical of the more credulous approaches the Midrash adopted, he sharply defended the paramount legitimacy of the Talmud and Rabbinic teachings.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Read Ibn Ezra's commentary to Deuteronomy 34:1: "According to my opinion, Joshua wrote from this verse onward (the last 12 verses in the Torah after Moshe died)." He also refers to chronological discrepancies (see write up in Amnon Bazak's, *To This Very Day*). How can this be interpreted to be anti-rabbinic philosophy? How can we incorporate it into traditional rabbinic thought?
2. Abraham Ibn Ezra had a hard life, from being a wanderer, to losing a son, to not being able to support himself and his family. Take a poem that he wrote and explain it in the context of his life and his beliefs.

### Suggested Readings

Marcus, Jacob Rader, and Marc Saperstein. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*. Hebrew Union College Press, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1f89t1n>.

Dr. Henry Abramson's online lecture "Who Was Ibn Ezra? Jewish Biography as History" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PRmKv\\_EuDg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PRmKv_EuDg)

Jacobs, R. L. (2015, April 3). *Abraham Ibn Ezra*. My Jewish Learning. Retrieved from <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/abraham-ibn-ezra/>.

Sela, S., *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden/Boston, Mass. 2003)

Simon, U., "Transplanting the Wisdom of Spain to Christian Lands: The Failed Efforts of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 8 (2009) 139-89.

Some sample poems <http://www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org/poets/abraham-ibn-ezra/>