CHAPTER THREE

THE ARGUMENT OF DOROT ‘OLAM

1. Modern Readings

The first students of modern Jewish Studies admired Ibn Daud as a philosopher but especially as an historian. For instance, in his monumental History of the Jews, a work that aimed at demonstrating Jewish intellectual creativity, Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), the leading scholar of the nineteenth-century Wissenschaft des Judentums, declared that Ibn Daud “was a conscientious historian, and his historical labors have proved of greater service to Jewish literature than his philosophical studies.”³ Sefer ha-Qabbalah, he continued, was “brief, but accurate and authentic, and much may be read between the lines. His Hebrew style is flowing, and not altogether wanting in poetic coloring.”² Similarly, Jakob Winter (1857–1940) attested that Ibn Daud had a “healthy sense of history.”³

At the same time, the sections of Dorot ‘Olam edited in this volume often experienced neglect or derision. The great Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907) dismissed Zikhron Divrey Romi as a tendentious little tract and did not hold its author in particularly high esteem.⁴ Even Moïse Schwab (1839–1918), who published an early linguistic study of geographic terms in Dorot ‘Olam, conceded that “one barely ever stops at these pages that contain no history and are not exactly a model of precision.”⁵ Adolf Neubauer (1831–1907) ignored them altogether in his epochal edition of historiographical texts, the Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles.⁶

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¹ Graetz, History of the Jews, vol. 3. From the Revolt Against the Zendik (511 C.E.) to the Capture of St. Jean d’Acre by the Mahometans (1291 C.E.), 365.
² Ibid., 366.
⁴ Steinschneider, Geschichtsliteratur der Juden: 45–48; 46.
⁶ Neubauer, Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles, 4, 6, xiii–xiv.
The first scholar to recognize the innovative character of Ibn Daud’s historical argument was Ismar Elbogen (1873–1943), one of the last scholars of the Wissenschaft. Fascinated by Ibn Daud, whom he ranked second only to Josippon among medieval Jewish historians, he recognized the uniting threads underlying the separate works. He was impressed by Ibn Daud’s knowledge of Romance and Arabic material, and at the same time appalled at his seemingly uncritical use of the same. Salo Wittmeyer Baron (1895–1989), too, acknowledged Ibn Daud’s pioneering use of sources, but he felt that he did so begrudgingly as this familiarity with Iberian texts “could only increase his apprehensions” in the face of the military successes of the Christian Reconquest. Haim-Hillel Ben-Sasson (1914–1977) studied Ibn Daud in the context of medieval European historiography, especially the so-called twelfth-century Renaissance, and suggested that Ibn Daud wrote in praise of the influential families whose proximity to the king had proven so vital to Jewish communal survival.

Gerson Cohen’s (1924–1991) seminal edition of Sefer ha-Qabbalah, published in 1967, offered what would become the definite interpretation of Sefer ha-Qabbalah and Ibn Daud’s historiography, although, as indicated in the Introduction, many of his assumptions have since been revised. His phenomenological approach situated the text and its author within a wider cultural, political, and literary context and anticipated later developments in the study of medieval historiography. Cohen fully recognized the communalities between ’Emunah Ramah and Dorot Ḭolam and, noting that both works emerged in the early 1160s, suggested that they formed a multi-dimensional “Defense of Judaism through Reason and History.” He read Sefer ha-Qabbalah as “a primary source for the mind of Abraham ibn Daud and the issues that he and members of his class regarded as uppermost in the Jewish community of their day,” such as the ancient and elitist character of the Jewish community whose presence predated that of the Christians in Iberia. The work, Cohen argued, manifested its author’s belief in a predetermined

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10 ShQ, xxxii.
11 ShQ, xv.