CHAPTER 1

In Search of the Message of *Megillat ha-Megalleh*

1.1 Introduction

The beginning of the twelfth century was a time of change and intense development in Western Europe. The Christian society had asserted its growing power in the First Crusade and in the Reconquista in Spain. Intellectual life in Christian Europe was flourishing, schools were being established and scholarly works written in many fields. These intellectual activities received additional impetus from recently discovered Arabic sources.

At the same time, a large part of the Jewish population of Spain came under Christian rule, as the Christian kingdoms conquered former Muslim areas, and also because of migration away from Muslim part of Spain where the conditions of the Jews were at times unstable. For the Jews living on the border between the two world powers, Muslims and Christians, the change, if understood as a permanent shift of domination, must have been an event of major consequence. Christian dominance also introduced, if only in a subtle way at first, an increasing pressure to convert the Jews to Christianity.

Abraham Bar Hiyya's life and work belongs to this context on the cultural and political divide between the Muslim and the Christian world. According to the very limited sources available on his life, he lived in Northeastern Spain, in what had in his days been a Christian area for centuries, yet at the same time it was very close to the border with Muslim Spain. Bar Hiyya was both a scientist and a theological thinker; his literary output displays a wide scientific knowledge that could only have come from Arabic sources; yet he also wrote two works with an essentially theological message. He chose to write his works in Hebrew instead of Arabic, which makes him a pioneer in the use of Hebrew for scientific and theological purposes, and suggests that he targeted his works to the Jews of the Christian countries.

Apart from the scientific works, Bar Hiyya wrote two theological works, of which *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* is relatively well-known\(^1\) while *Megillat ha-Megalleh*

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1 The first printed edition of *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* was published in 1860. This edition will be referred to as *H-N*. Subsequently, much of the secondary literature was based on this work, at least until *Megillat ha-Megalleh* was published in 1924. *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* has also been translated into English by G. Wigoder (*Wigoder, Meditation*, 1969), who has also edited a new Hebrew edition (Abraham Bar Hiyya, *Hegyon ha-nephesch*, 1971).
leh\textsuperscript{2} has received less attention. The latter work is usually known for its messianic calculations, for a few philosophical passages and for its chapter on astrology. This study analyzes the work as a complete text in its historical and cultural context, and argues that it—written at this time when Jews increasingly came under Christian influence and dominance—presents a coherent, extended and many-faceted argument for the continuing validity of the Jewish hope for redemption. In his argument, Bar Hiyya presents a view of history, the course of which was planted by God in creation. This history, he claims, runs inevitably towards the future redemption of the Jews. Bar Hiyya uses philosophical, scientific, biblical and astrological material to support his argument, and several times makes use of originally Christian ideas, which he inverts to suit his argument. Furthermore, Bar Hiyya’s sources for philosophical, scientific, historical and astrological knowledge, although usually anonymous, in most cases cannot be other than Arabic. Although Bar Hiyya never explicitly refers to the phenomenon of conversion, it appears that he is in effect trying to convince the Jews, using Jewish, Muslim and Christian sources, that conversion to Christianity is the wrong option.

The goal of this study is to examine Megillat ha-Megalleh as a complete text, rather than focusing on specific aspects of the work, as much of the earlier research has tended to do, and in this way to approach the original intent of the author. The study is arranged according to the structure and contents of Megillat ha-Megalleh itself. The complete work is not available in English translation and not many readers are likely to have read the original Hebrew in its entirety. Therefore this book will follow the contents of Megillat ha-Megalleh from the beginning to the end, describing and analyzing its contents, presenting numerous passages in translation, and highlighting how Bar Hiyya’s discourse and argumentation evolves in the text. Important findings will be noted as they arise from the analysis, and summarized at the end of each chapter, and overall conclusions will presented at the end of the book. In this way the reader should be able to follow Bar Hiyya’s argumentation throughout his work, to be able to examine Bar Hiyya’s writing in translation, and to follow how my analysis reaches the conclusions that it does. The study is also intended to serve scholars working in specific fields who may be interested in the philosophical, historical or astrological passages of Megillat

\textsuperscript{2} The only printed edition of this work is Sefer Megillat ha-Megalleh, by Adolf Poznanski and Julius Guttman, published by Verein Mekize Nirdamim in Berlin 1924. This edition is referred to as MM in this study. The only translation to a modern language is the Catalan translation by Jose Maria Millàs Vallicrosa, Llibre revelador, 1929.