THE FIRST SURVEY OF THE METAPHYSICS IN HEBREW

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1. Introduction

In his seminal and often-quoted study on the appropriation of the sciences by Jews in medieval Provence, Gad Freudenthal calls attention to the important role of the medieval Hebrew encyclopedias in the transmission of science and philosophy from Arabic into Hebrew.\(^1\) The first encyclopedia that he discusses in this regard is the Midraš ha-ḥokhmah by Judah ben Solomon ha-Kohen, originally written in Arabic, presumably in the 1230s, and translated by the author into Hebrew around 1247.\(^2\) Since the publication of Freudenthal’s study considerable progress has been made in the study of the Midraš ha-ḥokhmah (henceforth: MH).\(^3\) Nonetheless, there are some areas and topics in Judah’s encyclopedic composition that await further exploration. The present paper seeks to address one such area, namely the section on Aristotle’s Metaphysics in the MH, by elaborating on Mauro Zonta’s valuable observations on the subject in his “The Place of Aristotelian Metaphysics in the Thirteenth-Century Encyclopedias.”\(^4\)

The importance of this section lies in the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, it is the first Hebrew text to present a substantial survey

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\(^2\) Ibid., 53–55. The Arabic version is no longer extant.


\(^4\) Harvey, ed., The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias, pp. 420–422.
of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Prior to that date Hebrew readers living in a Christian environment with no access to Arabic but seeking to acquaint themselves with Aristotelian metaphysical, or more generally, philosophical thought could find relevant material in the Hebrew translations of the writings of Jewish philosophers like Saadya, Judah Halevi, and above all Maimonides. However, if those readers wished to turn to the actual Aristotelian sources underlying the Jewish philosophers’ expositions, they would have had to learn Arabic or Latin. This is why, as Judah ha-Kohen explains, Italian Jews requested him, during his stay in Italy in the service of the emperor Frederick II, to undertake the translation of his encyclopedia into Hebrew.\(^5\) Indeed, Judah, a native from Toledo who was well versed in the philosophical-scientific curriculum as studied in Muslim Spain, was a most suitable candidate to transmit this body of knowledge to his fellow Jews.

In fact, the dissemination of contemporary scientific learning was one of Judah’s aims underlying the composition of the *MH*, and for him the best way to realize it was to provide his readers with direct access to the relevant sources, that is, the most authoritative writings of his day, in abridged form. For philosophy this meant Aristotle’s philosophical works as interpreted by Ibn Rušd, and in the case of the survey on the *Metaphysics*, this meant the Middle Commentary (henceforth: MC). It is important to bear in mind that Judah’s Hebrew survey was produced before integral Hebrew translations of the Aristotelian text or of Ibn Rušd’s commentaries on it became available. The Commentator’s Epitome of the *Metaphysics* was translated into Hebrew in 1259 by Moses ibn Tibbon, while his MC on it was rendered into Hebrew in 1284 by Zeraḥyah ben Išḥaq Ḥen, and a second time by Qalonymos ben Qalonymos in 1317.\(^6\) Two other texts to be mentioned in this regard are Moses ibn Tibbon’s translation of Themistius’ commentary on Book Λ (1255) and Falaquera’s *De’ot ha-Filosofim* (ca. 1270?), which mainly draws on one of the redactions of the Epitome. The Hebrew version of Ibn Rušd’s Long Commentary was produced around 1320–1325. Latin–into–Hebrew translations of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* were to follow only in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, in Spain.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) *MH*, MS Oxford, Bodleian, Mich 551, fol. 123v. All references to the *MH* are to this MS. I have also consulted MSS Hunt 59, and Pococke 343, owned by the Bodleian Library.


\(^7\) For more details, see Zonta, “The Place of Aristotelian *Metaphysics*”, pp. 415–416.