NICOLE ORESME AND HASDAI CRESCAS ON MANY WORLDS

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The two most creative thinkers in the new physics of the late fourteenth century were arguably Nicole Oresme (ca. 1320–1382), grand maître of the College of Navarre at the University of Paris and later Bishop of Lisieux, and Hasdai Crescas (ca. 1340–1410 / 1411), Rabbi of the Jews of the Crown of Aragon and advisor to its kings. The direct or indirect influence of Oresme on Crescas was long ago noted by Pierre Duhem, and further explored by Shlomo Pines and others. This connection is particularly striking with regard to their notions of infinite space and eternal time, and their critique of Aristotle’s theory of natural places.¹ Given Oresme’s connection to the Kingdom of Navarre, adjacent to the Crown of Aragon, it is likely that his works were known and available in Crescas’ vicinity. It is reasonable to speculate that Crescas knew scholars who had studied with Oresme in Paris, and it is not inconceivable that he met Oresme personally.²

In my following remarks, I shall compare the views of Oresme and Crescas on the problem of many worlds. Both philosophers discuss the problem primarily in response to Aristotle’s thesis in De caelo, I, 8–9, 276a–279b, that there is one and only one world. Although Oresme eventually accepts Aristotle’s thesis and Crescas explicitly rejects it, the approaches of the two philosophers to the problem are in many respects similar.


The two main discussions of Oresme’s on the problem of many worlds are found in his *Quaestiones* on Aristotle’s *De caelo*, I, q.q. 17–18, and in his *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, I, 24.4 The *Quaestiones* probably date from Oresme’s early teaching days at the College of Navarre (1348–1350), while the *Du ciel et du monde* was written much later, in 1377, when Oresme was dean of the Cathedral of Rouen. The *Du ciel et du monde* is a French translation with commentary of Aristotle’s *De caelo*, and was written at the behest of King Charles V of France, to whom Oresme was a close advisor.

Crescas’ discussions of many worlds are found in his *Light of the Lord*, I, 2, 1; I, 2, 15; I, 2, 19; I, 3, 4; IIIa, 1, 5; IV, 1–2. The *Light of the Lord* was written over many years, and completed in 1410.5 The discussion in I, 2, 1, although appearing early in the book, is manifestly a late interpolation by Crescas, appended to his arguments against the Aristotelian proposition that an infinite magnitude is impossible.6 The discussions in I, 2, 15 and 19, and I, 3, 4, are interconnected, and concern the possibility that different Gods rule different worlds.7 The passage in IIIa, 1, 5, concerns the doctrine of the eternal creation of successive worlds.8 IV, 1, treats the problem of eternity *a parte post* and successive worlds;9 and IV, 2, treats that of many worlds existing simultaneously.10

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