THE GREEK LIBRARY OF THE MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS

Steven Harvey

The subject of the Greek philosophic and scientific library of the medieval Jewish philosophers might seem, at first thought, to the scholar today not particularly interesting. To be sure, one must distinguish between the pre-Maimonidean period of Jewish philosophy when Jews studied philosophy in Arabic and the post-Maimonidean period when Jews studied philosophy in Hebrew and relatively few could read Arabic. But once this distinction is made, the situation seems pretty clear. For the pre-Maimonidean period – that is, for the ninth through the twelfth centuries – whether in the East in Iraq or the West in al-Andalus, the Greek library of the Jewish philosophers was essentially the same as that of the Muslims. Whatever texts the Muslims had were for the most part available to the Jewish thinkers as well. They both spoke the same language, and it is thus not at all surprising that philosophy emerged in medieval Judaism at the same moment in which it emerged in medieval Islam.¹ As for the post-Maimonidean period, that is, for the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, when philosophic activity was for the most part carried out in Hebrew, one need simply consult Steinschneider’s monumental Die hebraischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters to know what was available in Hebrew translation and what not.² Indeed the current project to update and translate Steinschneider will only make it easier to check the availability of Greek philosophic and scientific texts in Hebrew translation in the Middle Ages.³

In truth, the situation is not as simple as it seems at first. The full picture, which must be uncovered if we are to understand the medieval Jewish philosophers fully, is painted not only in broad bright strokes of color, but also in fine shades and hues that are too often unnoticed by present day scholars. We will soon see that defining the Greek library available to the medieval Jewish philosophers is a more challenging and interesting task than one might think.

1. Plato

In the present paper I will limit myself to a seemingly simple question: To what extent did the medieval Jewish philosophers have access to the writings of Plato and Aristotle? To make things even easier, I will focus first on Plato. Scholars of Jewish thought are wont to assume that the dialogical form of Solomon ibn Gabirol’s *Fons vitae* and Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* was inspired by the Platonic dialogues. Plato is mentioned by many Jewish philosophers, and works such as the *Timaeus*, *Republic*, and *Laws* are cited by name. Maimonides specifically advises that Plato’s writings are in parables and difficult to understand, and can be dispensed with as the writings of Aristotle are sufficient. But did any of these Jewish thinkers, including Maimonides, ever read a Platonic dialogue? This, of course, is the same question that has been repeatedly asked about the Islamic thinkers. And the fact is, despite the testimonia of the learned Arabic bibliographers, we do not know for sure. I have recently examined this question anew with regard to the commonly

---
