A NOTE ON THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE DIALOGHI D’AMORE: THE CASE OF ABRAHAM COHEN DE HERRERA

Aaron W. Hughes
University of Calgary

Abraham Cohen de Herrera (ca. 1570–1635) follows a number of earlier Jewish thinkers of the Italian Renaissance, who sought to interpret the Kabbalah philosophically. However, the only Renaissance Jewish philosopher that Herrera mentions by name is Judah Abravanel (ca. 1465–after 1521).1 I shall address this by suggesting that Abravanel’s ‘circle of love’ (il circolo degli amori) pervades Herrera’s cosmology, forming the background against which much of his thinking takes place.

My goal in doing this is twofold. On the one hand, I offer this as an attempt to show an important, though often implicit, source in Herrera’s cosmology and metaphysics. Yet, seen from another angle, this will enable us to witness an important chapter in the reception history of Abravanel’s Dialoghi d’Amore. Within this context, there is a tendency in the secondary literature to focus solely on the possible sources of Judah Abravanel’s development of concepts such as the ‘circle of love’; yet virtually nothing on its subsequent reception by later thinkers.2

Before I move to my examination, let me briefly highlight several features of Abravanel’s Dialoghi d’Amore that a seventeenth-century converso thinker would have found attractive. First, unlike other works, the Dialoghi were written in the vernacular as opposed to Hebrew.3

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1 In particular, Herrera mentions Judah Abravanel, whom he calls Leo Hebraeus, three times in his Puerta del Cielo (IV.13; VII.14, and X.13). I have consulted Abraham Cohen de Herrera, Gate of Heaven, translated from the Spanish with Introduction and Notes by K. Krabbenhoft (Leiden 2002).


3 On the translation of the Dialoghi d’Amore into Spanish, see, e.g., J.N. Novoa,
This would have made it accessible to a generation of thinkers, whose knowledge of Hebrew was uncertain at best. Secondly, the Dialoghi provided one of the most sophisticated and subtle readings of love to emerge from the Italian Renaissance, one that combined all of the major trajectories of Renaissance thought—humanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Neoplatonism. Thirdly, if Abravanel was comfortable with the intellectual, aesthetic, and literary worlds of Renaissance humanism, he was equally at home in the world of Jewish thought, especially Kabbalah, where beauty was also regarded as a universal principle pervading the entire cosmos. Finally, Judah Abravanel was also part of a trend in the fifteenth century that witnessed Jewish thinkers begin to stress the limitations of human reason.

For Judah Abravanel, the universe, more specifically the divine anthropos, contains within itself all three worlds. Moreover, these three worlds are mirrored, for Abravanel, in the tripartite division of the human into body (corpo), soul (anima), and intellect (intelletto).

Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s ontology also assumes a tripartite structure, which in Puerta del Cielo VII.14 he cites in the name of Judah Abravanel. Here he refers to the divine anthropos that ‘contains in himself all three worlds’: ‘. . . the mental, in which the Deity places the mind and the soul; the heavenly, which consists of the spheres and the stars; and the sublunary, which includes the elements and the elementals.’ For Herrera, these three worlds are created by Ein Sof through the emanative system of the sefirot. These three worlds—respectively referred to as beri’ah, yetzirah, and ‘asiyah—are progressively more accessible to humans, and thus provide a ladder to ascend to knowledge of the divine. These three worlds, although distinct, are nevertheless intimately connected to one another:

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2 E.g., Judah Abravanel, Dialoghi d’Amore, ed. Santino Caramella (Bari 1929) II.91: ‘The human body is, like the world, divided into three parts, one above the other. And starting from the bottom, the first part extends from a sheet of tissue or membrane, which divides the body into two at the waist and is called the diaphragm, down to the feet. The next highest extends from that partition to the head [testa]. The third highest is the head.’
3 Dialoghi III.331.
4 Puerta VII.14 (Krabbenhoft, 370).
5 E.g., Puerta V.9 (Krabbenhoft, 170).