INTRODUCTION

A number of philosophers active in some of the most important Jewish cultural centres of the second half of the fifteenth century (the kingdom of Aragon in North-Eastern Spain; Florence, Mantua and Padua in Central and Northern Italy) seem to have grown increasingly unsatisfied with one of the main traits that characterised Spanish and Provençal Jewish philosophy during the previous two centuries—namely its reliance upon Averroes’s interpretation of Aristotle and, in general, upon traditional Jewish Aristotelianism, mainly based upon medieval Arabic-Islamic philosophy.

In their pursuit of a renewal of Jewish philosophy, these authors turned to the doctrines and methods of contemporary Latin Scholasticism. Thus, after three centuries, Scholasticism partly replaced Arabic-Islamic philosophy’s role as a guide in the development of European Jewish thought. These philosophers, who apparently read Latin very well, were impressed by the new theories formulated by their Latin colleagues, from Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas onwards. They tried to assimilate these theories in two ways. In the first place, they produced a wave of translations of Latin Scholastic texts into Hebrew, intended to replace the old translations of Arabic Aristotelian texts produced between 1200 and 1350. Secondly, they composed original works in Hebrew (mainly commentaries and questions on Aristotle), in which they faithfully reproduced the techniques and terminology of late Scholasticism, and explicitly quoted and discussed Scholastic texts and doctrines. Some of these authors—possibly also in order to avoid being accused of interest in non-Jewish doctrines—declared that a deeper understanding of the subtleties of contemporary Scholasticism was not only useful for updating Jewish philosophy and theology, but was also necessary for engaging in religious controversies with Christian scholars.

Thus, in fifteenth century Italy and Spain there came into being what we may call a “Hebrew Scholasticism”: Jewish authors composed philosophical treatises in which they discussed the same questions
and used the same methods as contemporary Christian Schoolmen. These thinkers were not simply influenced by Scholasticism: they were real Schoolmen who tried to participate (in a different language) in the philosophical debate of contemporary Europe. Although these “Hebrew Scholastic” works depended heavily (as we shall see) on Latin sources, they were not mere translations or compilations: their authors, adopting a technique employed also by their Christian colleagues, mixed words and doctrines taken from these sources with words and doctrines that were, instead, original. Consequently, the relationship of “Hebrew Scholasticism” to its Latin counterpart, rather than one of mere dependence, is one of “parallelism”, involving the independent elaboration of similar conclusions from the same premises.1