11.1. INTRODUCTION

That Ibn Gabirol and Spinoza have shared a similar neglect in the Jewish philosophical corpus, albeit for ostensibly different reasons, is not surprising. Of course, part of the reason for the neglect of Ibn Gabirol’s magnum opus Meqor Hayyim (Fons Vitae) was simply due to the fact that the “Jewishness” of its author was obscured for centuries; in contradistinction, Spinoza was explicitly excluded from the canon until very recently.¹ I shall return to the details of Spinoza’s excommunication below, for it raises interesting questions regarding Spinoza’s status in the history of Jewish philosophy. In the case of Meqor Hayyim, Mendes-Flohr has reminded us that it contains very little “Jewish” content: “by which criteria is the volume, originally written in Arabic and with no expressed Jewish character, to be deemed a work of Jewish philosophy,” he asks.² For Gabirol’s text has in fact had a checkered history. The original work was written in Arabic, and has come down to us in a Latin translation of the twelfth century made by John of Spain, in collaboration with Dominicus Gundissalinus. Hebrew extracts were compiled in the thirteenth century by the philosopher Shem Tov ben Josef ibn Falaquera, and then subsequently translated into Latin under the author’s name of ‘Avicebrol’ or ‘Avicebron’. Latin Scholastics

¹ In fact, Spinoza has been reappropriated in recent years, as it were. See for example, the recent collection of essays in Heidi M.Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman, eds., (2002).
² Paul Mendes-Flohr (2002), 757.
reading the *Fons Vitae*, as it had become known by the thirteenth century, did not connect the work to their Spanish Jewish author. In 1857, a French scholar named S. Munk edited and translated the Hebrew extracts once again. It was while comparing the editions in Falaqera and Albert the Great that Munk noted that the appelations “Avicebron”, “Avencebrol”, and “Avicebrol” in fact referred to the great Jewish poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol. Munk thus reintroduced Ibn Gabirol to a nineteenth century audience.³

Mendes-Flohr’s query thus introduces yet another question, namely whether *Meqor Hayyim* would have played a major role in Jewish thought even if we had known all along that its author was in fact a Jew. Perhaps anticipating this question, Klausner already noted what he took to be an amazing phenomenon in the history of Jewish philosophy, namely that “The people of Israel have rejected, consciously or not, a long chain of philosophers of Jewish origin, all of whom were consciously or not, Platonists. The first was Philo … the second Ibn Gabirol … the third Judah Abravanel … and

³ Many scholars have mentioned the lack of Jewish content in *Meqor Hayyim*: unlike his poetry, this work contains virtually no references to other Jewish texts, ideas or sources. Gabirol’s primary influences appear to reside in several Neoplatonist texts that represent a variation upon standard Plotinian cosmology. Plotinus’ *Enneads* was transmitted in a variety of ways, most notably through the *Theology of Aristotle* (a paraphrase of books 4, 5 and 6 of the *Enneads*), and through doxographies, collections of sayings of Plotinus which were circulated among religious communities. The *Theology of Aristotle* exists in two versions: The shorter (vulgate) version, belonging to a later period and found in many manuscripts, and a second, longer version that exists in three fragmentary manuscripts in Hebrew script. Two other influential works are worthy of note. Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* was transmitted to Jewish thinkers in the period between the early ninth and late tenth centuries through an Arabic translation *Kalām fī māhūd al-khaṭr*. Known to Latin thinkers as the *Liber de causis*, it was translated in the twelfth century from Arabic into Latin most likely by Gerard of Cremona and was generally attributed by medieval philosophers to Aristotle. Detailed discussion of recent editions and translations of the *Theology of Aristotle* can be found in R.C. Taylor, (1992). Paul Fenton has recently discovered that Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera translated quotations directly from the original “vulgate” Arabic version of the *Theology* into his own work, making Ibn Falaquera the only medieval Jewish author to have done so. See Fenton (1992), 27–39. And finally, the *Book of Five Substances* attributed to Empedocles was originally written in the ninth century in Arabic and translated into Hebrew in the fourteenth -fifteenth centuries. Published by David Kaufmann in 1899, this pseudo-empedoclean work was highly influential upon the work of Ibn Gabirol, especially in its placement of “spiritual matter” as the first of the five substances.