CHAPTER FIVE

R. HASDAI CRESCAS

THE LIGHT OF THE LORD

Introduction

R. Hasdai Crescas’ *magnum opus*, *The Light of the Lord*, written in Spain and completed in 1410,\(^1\) is a study in contrasts. It is a treatise devoted to a systematic presentation of Jewish dogma that contains probably more original and profound purely philosophic insights and arguments than any other Jewish treatise of the Middle Ages. It is an Anti-Aristotelian work that not only attacks the foundations of Aristotelian philosophy from a religious standpoint but also from a philosophic one. In many ways it anticipates Spinoza’s 17th century critique of Aristotle, and may well have influenced it.\(^2\) At the same time, Aristotelian thought pervades the *Light of the Lord*. Despite the fact that Crescas clings to the view of a freely willing personal deity of Jewish tradition and makes it the foundation of his philosophy, he in many ways remains in the orbit of the Aristotelian tradition in his thinking.

Like most theologians, R. Hasdai Crescas regarded philosophy as the handmaiden of religion. His anti-Aristotelian philosophic arguments, and the trailblazing insights they contained, were not primarily intended to further the cause of philosophy. They were subservient to the religious objective of defending Judaism against the threat posed by the still dominant philosophic tradition traced to Aristotle. In this, his treatise is similar in spirit and form, if not actual content, to that of the great Islamic thinker, Alghazali’s *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, written three centuries earlier.


Crescas was not a prolific author. In addition to the *Light of the Lord* He wrote two philosophical polemics against Christianity in the “vernacular” (probably Catalan), a Passover sermon that contains theological-philosophical material, and a chronicle dealing with the massacres of 1391. His activities as the rabbi of Saragossa, and as the de facto religious leader of Aragonese Jewry during a difficult period in its history, probably left him little time for writing. Some of the sections underwent notable revisions during the course of writing. The catastrophe that engulfed Aragonese Jewry in 1390 may have exerted its influence on Crescas’ philosophical-theological thought, explaining some of these revisions.

In the introduction to his treatise, Crescas states his intention to write a detailed compendium of the commandments, to be entitled *Lamp of the Commandment* (Ner Mizvah). The *Light of the Lord* was to serve as the first part of a comprehensive philosophical-legal project, and *Lamp* the second. This task, unfortunately, was never accomplished. Only the *Light* was completed after many years of labor. The role model for this project was Maimonides, who wrote philosophical and legal works, and whose great legal compendium, *Mishneh Torah*, opens with a philosophical section. Crescas was not only inspired by Maimonides' works. He was also dissatisfied with them. He desired to follow

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4 See Aviezzer Ravitzky, *Crescas’ Sermon on the Passover and Studies in his Philosophy* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1988).


7 This is particularly true of Crescas' discussion of free will. For a discussion of this issue see Ravitzky, *Crescas' Sermon on the Passover*, 34-60; Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1998): 137-49. Harvey brings another example of how Crescas' views evolved on pages 11-13.

8 Shlomo Fischer ed., *Sefer Or Hashem* (Jerusalem: Sifrei Ramot, 1990): 7. All references to *Light of the Lord* in this chapter will be to this edition.