Albalag, Isaac

As is the case for many medieval philosophers and exegetes, the details of Isaac Albalag’s life (13th century) remain shrouded in obscurity. It has been suggested that he lived and wrote in Provence, but it is more likely that he resided in Spain, perhaps in Catalonia. All that survives from his pen are two works: a partial translation of al-Ghazali’s Maqāsīd al-Falāṣīfa (“Intentions of the Philosophers”; called in Albalag’s translation De‘ot ha-filosofim, “Opinions of the Philosophers”), and Hebrew notes on the translation, entitled Sefer Tiqqun ha-De‘ot (“Correction of the Opinions”). The latter consists of occasional explanations and criticisms of al-Ghazali, identifications of the philosophical background, mainly in Avicenna, and corrections in light of Averroes.

For the most part, Albalag presents straightforward technical philosophical discussions in Tiqqun ha-De‘ot, but from time to time he introduces philosophical explications of relevant biblical verses and rabbinic dicta. For example, in chapter 58, which contrasts the deductive nature of prophetic knowledge with the inductive nature of philosophical-syllogistic knowledge, Albalag singles out Jacob’s ladder as the perfect image of the latter. Philosophical knowledge, like ascending the ladder, is acquired from below to above, moving from the four elements and composite substances in the sublunar world (the ladder) to the celestial bodies and forces (the angels of God ascending and descending) to separate substances (the Lord above the ladder). According to Albalag, furthermore, this shows that Jacob’s dream (Dreams) was not prophetic, but philosophical; it is an exhortation of sorts, pointing the way to a philosophical-scientific understanding of the world.


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