

Elisa Coda, *Le forme degli elementi. Isaac Abravanel e la tradizione aristotelica medievale*, Pisa, Pisa University Press, 2018, 218 pp., ISBN: 9788833390413. Cloth: €22

Reseñado por SYLVAIN ROUDAUT  
Université de Rouen, FR  
sylvain.roudaut@hotmail.com

Elisa Coda's book provides the Italian translation of a short treatise written by Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century together with a transcription from the *princeps editio* and a doctrinal study of the text. The original Hebrew text (*Šurot hayesodot*) was written between 1457 and 1467 and was first printed without any title as an appendix to the *Aṣeret Zeqenim (The Crown of the Ancients)* edited in 1557. This short treatise is a work of natural philosophy that deals with the problem of defining the nature of the elements.

The book opens with an introduction containing much information useful for understanding the treatise and its intellectual context. First, the introduction offers a biographical presentation of Isaac Abravanel, who was an important statesman, diplomat and courtier of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. His life full of twists and turns is all the more interesting considering that Abravanel was one of the greatest Jewish scholars of this period. The introduction also provides a brief historical survey of the main influences that shaped medieval Jewish philosophy. The author describes its main phases of development from the early Middle Ages to early Modern era and summarizes the story of the translations of Greek philosophy into Arabic, Latin and Hebrew (pp. 29-43). This historical introduction helps the reader to understand the long and complex tradition of interpretation inherited by Abravanel, who makes reference to many philosophical sources reviewed in detail by the author (pp. 49-56). The treatise is presented in a side by side bilingual format. It must be noted that the understanding of the treatise has been made easier by the text layout, which clarifies its structure. The treatise is followed by detailed notes on the Hebrew text and a substantial commentary on Abravanel's doctrine (pp. 109-182). A rich bibliography complements this significant piece of scholarship, as well as useful indexes of names, manuscripts and passages from ancient and medieval works.

The great merit of Coda's book is that it provides a comprehensive study of a hitherto poorly studied text. The treatise *The Forms of the Elements* aims at explaining Aristotle's theory of the elements (fire, earth, air and water) owing to the interpretations given by several of his ancient and medieval commentators. More precisely, Abravanel intends to decide between three possible definitions of the forms of the elements: 1) the forms of the elements are their qualities (hotness, coldness, wetness and dryness); 2) the forms of the elements are heaviness and lightness; 3) the forms of the elements are substances (not perceptible to the senses), which proper qualities are accidents. As Coda points out (pp. 48-49, p. 171), Abravanel's text follows

the style of a scholastic question: he discusses the arguments defended by several authors for and against these conflicting positions before presenting his own view. Abravanel chooses the first position, which he regards as the true conception of the elements defended by Aristotle. An immediate and interesting consequence of this view is that it erases the distinction between the substantial forms of the elements and their proper qualities. But the main interest of Abravanel's treatise lies in the various philosophical sources used in the discussion. In order to analyse the three possible definitions of the nature of the elements, Abravanel mentions the opinions of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisia, Themistius, Averroes, Avicenna, Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Tufayl, Averroes, Gersonides and Moses Narboni. Coda's work is highly documented and offers an excellent presentation of the historical transmission of all these sources throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The issues lying at the core of the treatise are, on the one hand, the relation of substances and qualities as distinct categories since, according to Abravanel, the qualities themselves are the forms of the elements. On the other hand, the debate implies a critical analysis of the view according to which elemental qualities as such must depend on substances – a view shared by Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna (and Averroes, despite Abravanel's reading). Coda demonstrates how Abravanel's solution to the problem and his objections to opposite opinions are built from a complex synthesis of these various and conflicting sources. Abravanel's interpretive strategy of Aristotle's main texts on the subject (*De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione* and the *Physics*) demonstrates a respectful attitude toward these philosophical sources that he tries to reconcile whenever possible, while he considers the Stagirite as the most important intellectual authority. However, the author proves that Abravanel's interpretation of his source materials is sometimes questionable, incomplete and even mistaken. This is clearly the case when Abravanel attributes the identification of elemental forms to heaviness and lightness to Averroes (pp. 78-79). This is still the case, for instance, when Abravanel brings Averroes's position together with the views of Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna on the status of quantified matter, whereas Averroes's original text is actually a criticism of Avicenna's doctrine (pp. 178-179).

Coda shows that Abravanel's critical – and, at times, misguided – interpretation of his Arabic sources enables him to justify his own reading of Aristotle's statements about the nature of the elements. In fact, Averroes was willing to maintain a distinction between the substance of the elements and their qualities (as in the « third position », shared by Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna). His defence of this view was partly directed against Alexander of Aphrodisias's identification of the elemental forms with their qualities (pp. 67-68). Favouring the reduction of the forms of the elements to their qualities, Abravanel manages to justify his opinion answering two objections raised by Averroes himself (pp. 100-101): 1) if the forms of the elements are qualities, there will be contrariety within the category of substance, since hotness and coldness are contraries, and 2) there will be motion in the category of substance, which also goes against Aristotle's teaching in the *Categories*. In order to solve these difficulties,

Abravanel argues that a substance can be contrary to another but not *qua* substance. The same thing can be considered as a substance *and* as a quality, just as a substance can be considered as a substance *and* as a member of a relation (like two substances can be considered as father and son). For similar reasons, Aristotle is not speaking of the elements as substances when he describes motion at the elemental level (pp. 102-103).

The historical reconstruction of the way Abravanel combines his Arabic and Jewish influences is essential for understanding the reception of the Aristotelian theory of the elements and the mixture in medieval Jewish philosophy. In this perspective, the precise phrases chosen by Abravanel are thoroughly analysed with their origins in Greek, Latin and Arabic texts. Coda's work covers most of the historical background of the various arguments used by Abravanel and, to this extent, represents a substantive contribution to the study of the text from historical, philological and philosophical points of view.

Any reader interested in the history of the physical (and cosmological) problem of the elements will find great value in this book. The problem of the elements and the mixture is known to be one of the most important and difficult for theories of nature following Aristotle's hylomorphism. This problem has been studied in great detail for the Latin tradition of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the evolution of this problem in the late Middle Ages and the early modern era, as well as its reception in other traditions, have not yet received the same attention. Coda's work on Abravanel's treatise represents an important contribution to this end, emphasizing an interpretation of Aristotle opposed to the classical distinction of the substantial forms of the elements and their proper qualities in the medieval Latin reception of Aristotle's natural philosophy. More generally, any reader interested in the historical evolution of Aristotelianism in the late Middle Ages will benefit from the author's thorough commentary on the text, which contains numerous references to recent scholarship (it must be noted that most of the secondary sources – e.g. in French or German – are not translated).

One can only regret that the author did not offer a critical edition of the original Hebrew text, but only a transcription based on the *editio princeps*. The author justifies this decision by claiming that only preliminary studies will make possible its critical edition, owing to a first general interpretation of the text (p. IX). As a matter of fact, the author expresses the wish that this translation of the first philosophical work of Abravanel will stimulate the desire for such an edition. It is hoped that the author's wish will come true in the near future.