



Faith and the Question of its Certainty in the Thought of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas

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ENG Abstract. This article examines the various levels of certainty in the thought of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, as

expressed in his *Sermon for Passover* and his major philosophical work, *Or Hashem*. In the first part of the article, the main discussion of R. Crescas on this subject in his *Sermon for Passover* is analyzed. In the second part, the findings are compared to the opinion of R. Crescas in his major philosophical work. Additionally, the article seeks to explain why this topic is more developed in the sermon than in his major philosophical book. Ultimately, it concludes that R. Crescas identifies four distinct levels of certainty: (1) irrefutable proofs and experiencing prophecy; (2) reasonable logical proofs and witnessing miracles that have no earthly explanation; (3) less likely proofs and miracles of a dubious nature; and (4) accepting the plain meaning of the text of the Torah and tradition in general. It is likely that R. Crescas did not mention this subject in the *Light of the Lord* due to the low degree of certainty of tradition, which he chose to keep concealed.

Keywords: Faith, Medieval Philosophy, Crescas, Theology, Epistemology.

ES La fe y su certeza en el pensamiento de Rabí Hasdai Crescas

Resumen. Este artículo examina los diversos niveles de certeza en el pensamiento de Hasdai Crescas, tal como pueden encontrarse en su *Sermón de Pascua* y su principal obra filosófica, *Or Hashem*. En la primera parte del artículo se analiza la discusión principal de Crescas sobre este tema en el *Sermón*. En la segunda parte, las principales ideas expuestas allí se comparan con la opinión de Crescas en *Or Hashem*. Además, el artículo busca explicar por qué este tema está más desarrollado en el *Sermón* que en su principal obra filosófica. En última instancia, se concluye que Hasdai Crescas identifica cuatro niveles distintos de certeza: (1) pruebas irrefutables y la experiencia de la profecía; (2) pruebas lógicas razonables y la presencia de milagros que no tienen explicación terrenal; (3) pruebas y milagros menos probables de naturaleza dudosa; y (4) aceptar el significado claro del texto de la Torá y la tradición en general. Es probable que R. Crescas no mencionara este tema en *Or Hashem* debido al bajo grado de certeza de la tradición, que eligió mantener oculta.

Palabras clave: Fe, filosofía medieval, Crescas, teología, epistemología.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The Definition of Faith in the *Passover Sermon*. 3. "Faith" as Used in *Or Hashem*. 4. Concluding Remarks. 5. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (Aragon c. 1340-1411/12) maintained a position regarding faith¹ that is both

fascinating and original, and consequently it has merited the attention of more than a few researchers, chief among them Aviezer Ravitzky and Zev

¹ On the question of faith in the Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages see Rosenberg 1988. Rosenberg discusses Crescas's approach on pp. 385-387. This article correctly states that the question of belief is related to three important issues: epistemology (a philosophical problem that is in principle not related to religious questions), the question of the authority and origin of religious beliefs, and the question of the duty to believe. Rosenberg's analysis of Maimonides is both extensive and incisive. However, it should also be noted

that, although Rosenberg's article mentions a fair number of Jewish thinkers of the 15th century and duly notes their widely differing opinions, it is far too short to be considered an in-depth analysis of all these opinions, including Crescas's. The concept of faith in Jewish philosophy in general was also reviewed Wolfson 1942; and also by Efrat 1965. Apart from these studies, there are extensive discussions in the literature on the thought of Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, and to some extent Yehuda Halevi.

Harvey². One finds Rabbi Crescas's discussion of faith concentrated in just a few places in his writings: it is the lion's share of his Passover Sermon³, it gets addressed in the introduction to his great philosophical work, *Or Hashem*⁴, and it is also addressed later in *Or Hashem*, specifically in the fifth and sixth chapters of the fifth part of book 2⁵. Despite the ample research attention earned by his approach to faith, and in particular his position that faith is not a commandment as, *inter alia*, it depends on the will, in my opinion, there are still several important issues related to Crescas's approach to faith which the research has not yet discussed exhaustively. The main topic that this paper will address is the different types of faith and the question of their reliability.

Most of the studies on the thought of R. Crescas focus – and rightly so – on *Or Hashem*, but, as we will see, his more developed definition of faith is found in his Passover Sermon⁶, which is why I will begin my analysis with this lesser-known work rather than with *Or Hashem*. One of the things that you will find striking in this discussion, which centers on the reliability of miracles as a source of faith, is that although he cites various sources of faith, R. Crescas does not mention anything said in the Torah, nor other traditional texts, nor the Sages as a source of faith. Be that as it may, I will then, in the second part of this paper, compare faith as described in the Passover Sermon with R. Crescas's description of faith as found in *Or Hashem*⁷. There we will address in particular his position that the Torah and Sages afford us the opportunity to obtain information on subjects that philosophy is not decisive about. As we will see, in *Or Hashem* it turns out that, for R. Crescas, what is written in the Torah and in the traditions of the Sages is of a lesser degree of reliability than other sources of faith, such as logical proofs, miracles, and prophecy. In his main discussion on the subject of faith in the Passover Sermon and therefore he refrained from introducing the discussion in the sermon into his main philosophical book 'Or Hashem'. Finally, I will conclude the paper by offering an explanation as to why R. Crescas avoided calling the Torah and the Sages sources of faith, and from there explaining

why this unique discussion of faith does not appear in *Or Hashem*.

2. The Definition of Faith in the Passover Sermon

As noted above, R. Crescas devoted most of the discussion in the Passover Sermon to the issue of the relationship between miracles and faith⁸. At the beginning of his discussion, he deals with the question of whether faith resulting from miracles is contingent upon human will⁹. He then turns to the question of the legitimacy of faith based on miracles¹⁰. This discussion is not found in *Or Hashem*. R. Crescas distinguishes between three different types of faith in terms of their reliability, and in so doing he ends up spelling out his peculiar take on faith:

The term "faith" [emunah] is applicable to opinion [da'at], faith [emunah], and certainty [imut]. To clarify, when reason is employed regarding some matter, one automatically says that they have attained a certain opinion, which is to say an inclination to that perspective – just that it immediately becomes subject to occasional refinement via falsification. And indeed, when some matter is verified for them via intellectual proof based on one of the things that has absolute proof, then they will immediately declare that they have attained certainty. Indeed, when there is no irrefutable proof brought to verify a given matter via an intellectual proof, but rather it was [only] verified via strong arguments which are not actually falsifiable, one can [still] declare belief in this thing, this [belief] being the mean between two extremes, i.e. opinion and certainty, even though the term "faith" is applied generally to all of them [i.e. the three concepts of opinion, faith, and certainty]. And regarding this, it becomes clear that a miracle, when not characterized by being beyond all doubt, with no possible [natural] explanation however tenuous, albeit engendering an opinion, nevertheless cannot engender faith, and certainly not certainty. But that which is characterized by being beyond doubt, with not even a tenuous possible [natural explanation], albeit not engendering absolute certainty, it does undoubtedly engender faith¹¹.

R. Crescas presents here a threefold division of the types of beliefs according to their reliability¹². The be-

² On the subject of faith in Crescas, see Harvey 2010 pp. 107-118; Ravitzky 2019 pp. 34-68, and Rosenberg 1988.

³ Specifically pp. 130-158. All quotations from the Passover Sermon are from the Ravitzky edition (hereafter Sermon).

⁴ All quotations from *Or Hashem* are taken from the S. Fisher edition, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 9-12.

⁵ *Or Hashem*, p. 219-225. In his polemical book *The Refutation of the Christian Principles* (published by D. Lasker, Jerusalem 1979), R. Crescas frequently mentions the concept of faith. It is important to remember that we do not have the original text, which was probably in Spanish or Catalan, but only a Hebrew translation by Rabbi Yosef Ibn Shem Tov.

⁶ Although Ravitzky's research dealt extensively with the analysis of the sermon and its relationship to *Or Hashem*, he did not emphasize the differences between the definition of faith in the Passover Sermon and the various roles of faith in *Or Hashem*. There is a lack of discussion regarding the relationship between R. Crescas's definition of faith in the Passover Sermon versus his noteworthy position in *Or Hashem*, according to which in cases where there are no philosophical proofs in any direction, i.e. only in cases where there are philosophically several possible answers must one turn to the Torah to determine the correct opinion.

⁷ And to a certain extent also to what is said in *The Refutation of the Christian Principles*.

⁸ Sermon, pp. 130-158

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-141. This discussion is largely like the content of Part 2, part 5 chapter 5 of *Or Hashem*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-155. Starting on page 155, the text realigns with the content of *Or Hashem* 2:5:6.

¹¹ Sermon, pp. 141-142. Hebrew text:

הוא שם האמונה כבר ישתתף לדעת ולאמונה ולאמונה. וביאור זה, שכאשר תגזור הסברא על דבר מה, כבר יאמר שיש לו דעת מה, והוא הנטיה אל הצד ההוא. אלא שכבר יקבל שיעור והצעה לפעמים מן הדחייה. ואמנם אשר התאמת לו בדרכי המופת השכלי דבר מה מהדברים שבא עליה המופת המוחלט, כבר יאמר שיש לו אמות נכ. אמנם כאשר לא התאמת בדרכי המופת השכלי דבר מהדברים שבא עליהם המופת המוחלט, אך התאמת בטענות חזקות בלתי מקבלות שיעור מן הדחייה אצלו, יאמר שיש לו אמונה בו, והוא כאמצעי בין ב' קצוות אשר הם הדעת והאמונה. אמנם בכלם יפול עליהם שם האמונה בכלל. ולזה הוא מבואר שהנס שאיננו באופן שלא יסופק בו אפילו באפשר רחוק, עם היות שיקנה דעת וסברא לא יקנה אמונה, וכל שכן אמות. באופן שלא יסופק בו אפילו באפשר רחוק, עם היות לא יקנה אמות מוחלט, יקנה אמונה בלי ספק.

¹² My reading here is slightly different from Ravitzky's (pp. 54-57). I disagree with him mainly on two points: 1. In my opinion, there is no essential distinction between the levels of reliability of prophecy and logical proofs. I base this especially on the fact that R. Crescas mentions them together in *Or Hashem*: "...regarding that which has become clear, [namely]

iefs that are absolutely reliable are beliefs based on irrefutable intellectual proofs (though later R. Crescas adds prophecy as a basis for reliable knowledge). This type of belief he calls "certainty". After that come beliefs that arise from strong proofs regarding which the person who holds them cannot find any counter-proofs, which leads to a level of belief called 'faith'. At a lower level yet are those things which are just on the level of opinion, which include positions a person has reasons to believe are correct, even if there are also reasons to reject those positions. R. Crescas asserts that the term 'faith' is used both generally to describe all three types of belief, regardless of their degree of credibility, as well as to specifically describe those beliefs that have intermediate credibility. He then remarks that miracles never afford a person certainty, but they can help a person to attain either faith or at least to form an opinion regarding some idea¹³.

Further on in the text¹⁴, R. Crescas notes that there are two doubts that can arise regarding the miracles that people witness:

1. That the miracle is not a miracle but merely an act of trickery or sorcery.
2. That the miracle does not come directly from God but is a feat performed by the prophet who, thanks to the virtue of his intelligence, can literally alter nature¹⁵.

that faith attained through logical assumptions, and all the more so that attained through the prophecy that occurred at that distinguished event [i.e. the revelation at Mt. Sinai], there is no room for human will to become involved." (p. 224). It should be noted that these words are not in the corresponding passage in the Passover Sermon where he talks about faith attained via signs and prophecy. 2. There seems to be no alternative position in *Or Hashem* stating that miracles can also lead to absolute faith. Crescas's words on p. 358 of *Or Hashem* are, in my opinion, completely compatible with what is written in the Passover Sermon, for although it is written there that miracles can engender complete faith, nevertheless, it also says that miracles are questionable because there is always a suspicion that they may be the result of witchcraft or sleight of hand.

¹³ In terms of the role of the will in attaining the various degrees of belief, R. Crescas's position is not entirely clear. On the one hand, he states in the Passover Sermon (p. 154) that: "... miracles engender what they can, whether opinion or faith, without recourse to human will." R. Crescas seems to be saying that faith is entirely the result of a person's intuitive conviction, which depends on the information in front of him and his psychological state. In other words, no intellectual decision to believe is made based on any sort of logical deduction or inference. Yet just two pages later in the Sermon (and also in *Or Hashem*, pp. 220 and 224), he emphasizes that prophecy and irrefutable proofs lead to a level of belief that has even less influence of the will on it than belief stemming from witnessing a miracle. In saying "less influence of the will", R. Crescas is clearly implying that the will is in fact very much involved in all levels of faith. The simplest way to reconcile this apparent contradiction is to say that while the will does not produce the initial faith generated by the witnessing of a miracle, a person can in principle later contemplate and refute or at least raise doubts about such faith by willfully searching for reasons that contradict those uncertain beliefs, such that the final beliefs maintained by a person are in part determined by the will. It should be noted here that although the will is involved in the process of finalizing beliefs, the will itself still remains deterministic in nature for R. Crescas. For a review of his deterministic position (alongside the positions of other thinkers as well), see Sadik 2017 pp. 268-276.

¹⁴ Sermon, pp. 142-154.

¹⁵ Ravitzky devoted the third part of the introduction to the Passover Sermon (pp. 69-110) to this subject and its various

R. Crescas then makes various statements to the effect that the miracles performed by Moses were relatively reliable. But towards the end of this discussion¹⁶, he states that only prophecy can engender certainty, and this only for the prophet who receives prophecy. This, he says, is why the Israelites fully believed in Moses only after the revelation at Mount Sinai.

It is important to summarize that in the opinion of R. Crescas as expressed in the Passover Sermon, beliefs come from two sources:

1. Sources that are unrelated to rational reflection or theoretical study, and in particular, miracles and prophecy.
2. Human intellectual endeavor via different kinds of syllogistic thinking.

The most reliable beliefs (i.e. those things we know with certainty) come from irrefutable proofs and from prophecy. Syllogisms and miracles can provide the basis for faith or the development of an opinion, each according to their degree of reliability. In the Passover Sermon, which is the main source in which he distinguishes between the reliability of different beliefs, R. Crescas does not mention at all belief that stems from traditions or study of the Holy Scriptures, and this is an important point to which we will return in detail later. When he discusses the efficacy of miracles or prophecy, R. Crescas is only referring to the degree of reliability of that belief for the prophet himself or for those who witnessed the miracle. This is the reason why he does not mention the possibility of doubting the veracity of miracles and the belief engendered by them out of a fear that poor transmission (or even outright invention) occurred between the occurrence of the miracle and the reception of the miracle generations later¹⁷.

There is certainly room for the argument that the nature of the discussion in the Passover Sermon and its overall tenor stem from the fact that R. Crescas's entire focus with the sermon is the concept of miracles. As we will see later, in *Or Hashem*, R. Crescas does in fact refer to tradition and the writing of the Torah as legitimate sources of faith. Therefore, my claim is not that when he wrote his sermon, R. Crescas rejected the tradition as a worthy source of faith, but only that he consciously avoided mentioning the tradition (including the written Torah and the words of the Sages) in his central discussion of the various sources of faith and their reliability.

To understand why R. Crescas would frame his arguments differently in his sermon versus his book, we must consider a few things. First, in my opinion, the avoidance of reference to tradition in the sermon is noteworthy because R. Crescas, while discussing miracles and the extent to which they can engender faith in people, mentions other sources of information

manifestations in Jewish philosophy as well as its origins in Arabic philosophy. It is interesting to note that in this section, R. Crescas actually raises the possibility that a complete prophet might perform a miracle to prove a belief that is not true.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 154-155.

¹⁷ Such a concern is mentioned, for example, in R. Isaac Pulgar's analysis of miracles as found in his *Ezer Ha-Dat*, Part I, Chapter 5 (Leviner edition, Tel Aviv, 1984, pp. 51-53).

such as various types of intellectual proofs and prophecy. So he could just as easily have mentioned the tradition during this discussion simply by pointing out that those people who did not witness the biblical miracles become aware of them via the oral tradition and scripture. And yet R. Crescas completely avoided touching on this rather obvious point in his dealing with the degree of reliability of the various sources of information. Given the fact that he certainly believed that the tradition is a source of faith, it must be that he was not interested in discussing the reliability of faith based on tradition because in his opinion – as can be seen in *Or Hashem* – the reliability of tradition is less than that of intellectual proofs, but also less than experiencing miracles and prophecy.

R. Crescas's division of the three terms used for belief – opinion, faith, and certainty – according to degree of reliability, does not exist in *Or Hashem*. It therefore behooves us to examine the use of the term 'faith' and its role in that book, and its relation to the tripartite, reliability-based division of belief as found in the Passover Sermon.

3. 'Faith' as Used in *Or Hashem*

R. Crescas uses the word 'faith' dozens of times in *Or Hashem*¹⁸. As mentioned, nowhere in his book does he indicate the specific meaning of the word 'faith', that is, belief that is at a level of reliability that lies somewhere between opinion and certainty. In the vast majority of cases, 'faith' is used as a general term that indicates that the person who has faith about something holds a certain position and considers it to be correct, this being in accordance with R. Crescas's statement in the Passover Sermon that 'faith' is an equivocal term¹⁹. It should also be noted that there are also several times in which he explicitly uses the word 'faith' to describe belief in errant positions²⁰. This fact does not contradict the definition of faith that we saw in the Passover Sermon, because there may be beliefs that are not very reliable

(especially those at the low end of the spectrum, i.e. opinion, though possibly also those at the intermediate level of faith) that will eventually turn out to be incorrect²¹. Only beliefs that result from irrefutable proofs and those that result directly from prophecy are necessarily true because their reliability is absolute. Curiously, R. Crescas does not mention in *Or Hashem* the logical possibility that a belief arising from an irrefutable proof or a prophecy could turn out to be incorrect.

As noted earlier, in *Or Hashem* there is an additional type of faith not found in the Passover Sermon that is quite different from the latter's three types of belief: faith based on tradition (including both the Torah as well as the writings of the sages). We will briefly review the different ways in which such faith finds expression in *Or Hashem* in order to try and determine the reliability of this type of belief.

An interesting example of tradition-based belief in *Or Hashem* relates to the question of the eternality of the Torah, which R. Crescas addresses in the fifth chapter of the first part of the third book. As per the general division used in *Or Hashem* wherein the beliefs of Judaism are categorized according to the degree of their so-called "rootedness", that is, according to the question of the extent that some given belief is a condition for believing in the divine source of the Torah, none of the beliefs of the third book are recognized as having the status of "cornerstone", i.e. they are not necessary for keeping the Torah, but are rather a belief that there is a religious obligation to believe in the truth of the Torah, even though those who do accept this belief still do not uproot the entire Torah²².

In the first section of the part dealing with the eternity of the Torah²³, R. Crescas explains that the Torah represents the highest level of legal perfection in terms of the actions it requires of people to do and in terms of the beliefs it teaches²⁴. The Torah sits at the peak of theoretical and practical perfection and therefore there is no possibility of improving on it with some other sacred book (תורה) and therefore it is eternal²⁵. Then, in the second section of the part R. Crescas raises the possibility that perhaps some

¹⁸ For example, pages (pages are in edition of the Hebrew original by R. Fisher): 3, 7, 9-13, 60, 66, 93, 116, 149, 156, 165, 170, 200, 202, 219-225, 249, 253, 269-270, 272-274, 280, 290, 309, 314-315, 317, 328, 350-351, 354-356, 358, 365, 371-372, 375, 399, and 401.

¹⁹ There are places where the source of the belief is clearer, such as pp. 202, 342, 350, and 358. There, R. Crescas is speaking about beliefs that stem from miracles. On pp. 220 and 224, he describes beliefs that arise from irrefutable proofs. It should be noted that even in the Passover Sermon, in the majority of cases, R. Crescas uses the word 'faith' in its broader sense, i.e. to refer to all positions that a person holds as true, and not in the limited sense that he sometimes employs where it only refers to beliefs of medium reliability. Thus, one must read the Sermon carefully and pay attention to context to correctly understand what R. Crescas is saying regarding faith.

²⁰ Mainly belief in the eternity of the universe. See, for example, *Or Hashem*, pp. 60, 273-274, 280, 290, 309, 314, 317, 342, and 371. It should be noted that also in his polemical work, *The Refutation of the Christian Principles*, most of the appearances of the word 'faith' are, not surprisingly, in the context of descriptions of Christian beliefs that he rejected as false. Examples can be found on pp. 34, 39, 40, 44, 47-48, 60, 68, 70, 76-79, 84, 87, and 90. However, it should be noted that some of these cases may be errant, while other legitimate occurrences are no longer identifiable as the extant version of *The Refutation* is the Hebrew translation by Rabbi Yosef Ibn Shem Tov, and not the original Catalan text written by R. Crescas.

²¹ We will not be discussing in this article R. Crescas's approach to errant beliefs stemming from prophecy because he concurs with Deut. 18:20-22 that the correct prediction of events is the main way in which prophets are proven trustworthy (book 2, part 4, especially chapter 2). It should be noted, however, that R. Crescas's statements in this source corresponds to his words in the Passover Sermon in that he mentions the possibility that humans can theoretically confuse an act of witchcraft for a miracle.

²² On R. Crescas's theory of Jewish principle of faith see Kellner 1986 pp. 108-139.

²³ *Or HaShem*, pp. 351-353.

²⁴ He refers to the sixth part of the second book, where he deals with these issues extensively. His words are similar to those of Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed* II:39-40 and III:27-28.

²⁵ R. Crescas's position assumes that there is no evolution whatsoever in the intellectual perfection of the human race. On the lack of human evolution from a philosophical and moral perspective, see Strauss 1997. In R. Crescas's opinion, from the fact that the Torah was given by God, who is fundamentally perfect, it follows that the Torah is most perfect as well. Moreover, given his rejection of human moral evolution, R. Crescas also rejected the proposition that the Torah could ever become irrelevant, such that whatever laws were appropriate in ancient times remain appropriate for all later gener-

people will doubt a part of the Torah (he mentions the Karaites who do not accept the Oral Torah). According to R. Crescas, such skepticism is problematic because if everyone were to constantly doubt the truth of the beliefs given in their sacred book, then people would not be able to trust in their belief system under any circumstances and they would perforce change their beliefs all the time. Therefore, the determination of what exactly are the correct beliefs was left to the sages. After that, R. Crescas raises the obvious objection to his argument: the Karaites also have their own sages and traditions. His answer is important to his case. According to R. Crescas, the authority of the Torah derives from the circumstances of its transmission:

But something which could be considered as raising doubts about our position is the sect of the Sadducees [i.e. the Karaites], who boast of the tradition they have received from their sages. However, it is also well known, given the events as passed down to us, that during the period of the members of the Great Assembly – by whose words we live our lives – the high priests and the Sanhedrin were comprised [entirely] of Pharisees. And it is they who are the ones who passed down the tradition to the masters of the Mishnah [and not the Karaites]... [And this sound tradition is not] as it is, undoubtedly, with regard to the sect of the Sadducees, since the basis of their fabrication is well known, given the simplistic thought and fabrication involved with taking texts literally, as opposed to tradition received from forefathers...²⁶

According to R. Crescas, it is clear and well known to all nations that the Karaism (or more precisely, Sadducism) arose in Judaism late in history, and therefore the Pharisaic Jewish tradition that preceded it is more correct, because it is the original source²⁷. Moreover, R. Crescas argues, we know that the tradition of the Oral Law is correct. How? Because we have a tradition – which itself is part of that same Oral Law – that most of the sages were amongst the Oral Law's supporters and indeed helped to create it. Now on its surface, the argument seems completely circular – the authority of the Oral Torah derives from the same Oral Torah! However, one can understand R. Crescas's words better if we refer to the various sources of information that Aristotle lists in the first chapter of his *Topics*²⁸. According to Aristotle, along with irrefutable intellectual proofs and evidence from

the senses, there are two other important sources of information: generally accepted notions and traditions. Traditions, according to how R. Crescas uses the term, consist mostly of reliable and well-known historical bits of information, while Aristotle's generally accepted notions are positions or opinions known to most people or to most professionals in a certain field²⁹. The source of the authority of accepted notions is that they are known to be true by the majority of people and/or the majority of knowledgeable experts. This is why R. Crescas emphasizes the fact that the majority of the Jewish sages received the Oral Law, and were partners in its on-going evolution.

What is important for our purposes (analyzing the philosophical nature of R. Crescas's criticism of the Karaites is not the purpose of this article) is that R. Crescas freely uses a source of information, i.e. tradition, that he does not mention in the definition of faith that he provides in the Passover Sermon. To reiterate, in the Passover Sermon, R. Crescas only mentions syllogisms and solid evidence (including the experience of miracles) as possible sources of beliefs. It should be noted that at the beginning of the second chapter of his discussion on the eternity of the Torah in *Or Hashem*³⁰, he explicitly mentions the word 'faith' many times to describe the positions that follow from the Torah. Therefore, it is impossible to resolve this tension by simply arguing that R. Crescas in some places in *Or Hashem* used the word 'faith' for sources of knowledge that are derived from syllogisms or miracles, much like in the Passover Sermon. An alternative explanation is needed to deal with his reference to tradition in *Or Hashem* that is lacking in the Passover Sermon.

From this it follows that in 'Or Hashem', R. Crescas accepted the fact that a well-known belief among the Jewish sages is legitimate evidence of its correctness. It is important to distinguish again between the reliability of prophecy for the prophet himself and the reliability of prophecy for those who merely hear or read the prophet's words – and the same distinction applies to miracles as well. The highest level of reliability is reserved for the prophets and for those who witnessed miracles. By contrast, the people who come later and can only rely on what is written in the Torah or passed down in Jewish tradition do not have as reliable knowledge. However, there is no alternative to relying on tradition when there is no more prophecy or miracles. This explains the frequent reliance on what is written in the Torah or on the Jewish

ations. This too then becomes part and parcel of the Torah's perfection.

²⁶ *Or HaShem*, p. 356. Hebrew original:

אבל מה שיחשב שהוא מסתפק עלינו, הוא כת הצדוקים, שמתפארים בקבלתם מחכמיהם. ואמנם הוא מפורסם גם כן, לפי הזמן שהעתיקו אלינו קורותיו, שבזמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה שעל פיהם אנו חיים, היו הכהנים הגדולים והסנהדרין מפרושים. והם אשר מסרו הקבלה לבעלי המשנה.... כמו שהוא בלי ספק בכת הצדוקים, שיסוד בדיאתם מפורסם, עם שהוא קל הבדיאה והמחשבה לקחת הדברים כפשוטן, בהפך מה שהוא בקבלה מן האבות....

²⁷ It should be noted that this assertion has generally been made by adherents of rabbinic Judaism, while others, especially the Karaites, have asserted that it is their ideology that predates the ideology of rabbinic Judaism.

²⁸ This chapter is also Maimonides' source in the eighth chapter of his *Words of Logic*. On Maimonides' approach to accepted

notions, the attribution of *Words of Logic* to him, and its various sources, see Sadik 2021.

On the topic of generally accepted notions in Aristotle see E. V. Haskins 2004. For the controversy in modern philosophy surrounding the moral validity of *ἔνδοξα* see Klein 1992.

²⁹ Regarding the question of when generally accepted notions should be believed as fact, in my opinion there is a distinction to be made between Maimonides versus Aristotle and al-Farabi. According to Maimonides, one can only learn from accepted notions those concepts that are related to morality, and not things that deal with scientific or metaphysical descriptions of the world. In contrast to this, with Aristotle and al-Farabi, there is certainly the possibility of relying on accepted notions relating to science and metaphysics. In this matter, R. Crescas concurred with the Aristotelian position and rejected Maimonides' approach – just as we saw above regarding the belief in the unity of God.

³⁰ *Or Hashem*, p. 354.

tradition in *Or Hashem*, the most important of which is the belief that God is one³¹.

The question now becomes, what is the degree of reliability of faith based on transmission alone, in relation to the other sources of faith, i.e. experiencing miracles and prophecy along with the various types of solid evidence?³² R. Crescas does not deal with this question explicitly. Fortunately, though, it is possible to arrive at an answer using indirect evidence based on two types of discussions that exist in *Or Hashem*:

First, in *Or Hashem* there are a number of examples in which R. Crescas clearly states that there are certain positions that are derived from transmitted material that are incorrect³³. Alongside these weaker traditions are certain sources regarding which he states that a position is correct based on the nature of their transmission alone³⁴. From this it can be concluded that the credibility of transmitted material is not absolute. Nevertheless, it is necessary at times to

³¹ Alongside this belief, R. Crescas mentions in the third and fourth books a series of beliefs that he knows to be correct based on what is said by the Sages or based on what is written in the Torah. This is the case, for example, on p. 391 regarding the existence of other worlds, on p. 396 regarding the question of whether the heavenly bodies are alive, and on p. 404 regarding the essence of demons. It should be noted that in the Passover Sermon (p. 144), R. Crescas mentions the public nature of the miracles performed in the presence of Moses as another reason for their reliability. Here he mainly means that they were done in front of a multitude of onlookers. The only other mentions of accepted notions in the Passover Sermon (pp. 131, 150-151, and 166) do not deal with the question of their reliability as such; they are simply acknowledged as being public knowledge. Similarly, we find that in his *Refutation*, the concept of generally accepted notions is used to establish the correctness of the miracles and the Torah of Moses in general (see pp. 79-80), while elsewhere the concept is merely used to indicate generally known things, regardless of their degree of reliability.

³² A phrase that recurs many times in the writings of R. Crescas is: "Truth bears witness to itself." With these words, he is pointing out that what is said in the Torah or by the Sages corresponds with intellectual proofs. The more interesting question is, of course, what to do in cases where there is only faith based on what is said in the Torah without any intellectual proof.

³³ For example, *Or Hashem*, pp. 37 & 273.

³⁴ For example: God's providence (p. 192), that forbidden foods are unhealthy (p. 228), reward and punishment in the World to Come (p. 234), the unique providence over the Jewish nation (p. 253), reasons for the commandments against evil-doing (p. 259), the publicizing of miracles (p. 311), that providence is related to observing the biblical commandments (p. 325), the story of the golden calf (p. 369), and the existence of heaven and hell (p. 406). From this assortment of examples it becomes clear that most of the positions accepted by R. Crescas purely on the basis of their being traditions are related to the issue of divine providence. This is an intriguing observation and begs further research into the role of providence in the methodology of R. Crescas.

There are also positions that have a different basis, and R. Crescas notes their form of dissemination as well in *Or Hashem*: the impediments to understanding God's essence (p. 96), the computations involved in the movement of the stars (p. 136), the naturalness of prophecy (p. 196), that diligence is rewarded – a position based on both experience and common knowledge (p. 207), the error of the philosophers regarding the essence of the soul after death (p. 245), the perfection of the heavenly bodies (p. 283), the existence of the soul after death (pp. 316, 319-320, and 334), the truth of the rabbinic dictum that "every created thing is fleeting" (p. 385), the influence of the stars (p. 397), the influence of amulets based on experience and the common knowledge of the sages (p. 399), and the existence of demons, also based on experience and common knowledge (p. 402).

utilize generally accepted notions – especially when there are no other reliable sources on the same subject – to establish the truth. We will briefly review two examples in which a rabbi relies on tradition or the written Torah when there are no longer any reliable sources of information, which is to say that when, in terms of the other sources of information, the contention at hand is possible, then it is the tradition that determines which of the possible contentions is correct. Second, there is one issue regarding which R. Crescas clearly states that there is a contradiction between what is known about it from the Torah and what is known based on intellectual evidence – the question of free choice – and we will discuss this point later.

After analyzing the various definitions of the existence of the one God in book 1, part 3, chapter 2 R. Crescas concludes that, theoretically at least, there could be two gods in the universe, one of which is not related to the world at all³⁵. However, argues R. Crescas, it is statements in the Torah, such as the famous verse, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4), that convinces us to believe that there is only one God³⁶. In other words, belief in the unity of God does not derive from philosophical evidence (not even of the less reliable sort), but solely from the authority of the Torah³⁷.

Another similar source is R. Crescas's discussion of the possibility of the existence of many universes. In this discussion, he gives rational reasons for and against the existence of many universes³⁸. At the end of his discussion, he dismisses all the reasons he brought and concludes the discussion with an important statement regarding his case regarding the different levels of reliability of the different sources of beliefs:

Since...it is established that in all the arguments [re multiple universes which] we have mentioned, whether in support of an affirmative or of a negative conclusion, there is nothing that determines the truth about this issue, and [indeed] all they do establish is the possibility of plurality, it is fitting that we not depart from the interpretation offered by some of our Rabbis of blessed memory. They said in the first chapter of [tractate] Avodah Zarah [on page 3b]: "This teaches that God courses through eighteen thousand worlds." Their intent here is that God's providence traverses all those worlds. And this is what they intended with respect to this³⁹.

In this passage we see explicitly the same attitude that we see implicitly regarding the unity of

³⁵ *Or Hashem*, pp. 99-115

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116

³⁷ In this section, R. Crescas does not attempt to explain the source of the authority of the Torah and why one must believe what is written in it. Rather, he deals with this subject in a different context in the third book of *Or Hashem*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 388-392 (book 4, issue 2).

³⁹ *Or Hashem*, p. 391 (book 4, issue 2). Hebrew original: וכאשר היה זה כן, והוא, שכבר התבאר שאין בכל הטענות שזכרנו, אם לצד החיוב ואם לצד השלילה, שיתן האמת בדרוש, ומה שהתבאר מהם הוא אפשרות הריבוי לבד, הנה ראוי שלא נרחיק מה שבא בדרש לקצת ר"ל. אפשרות בראשון מע"ז (ג: ב) "מלמד ששט ב"ח אלף עולמות". והכונה בו, שהשגחתו משוטטת בכל העולמות ההם. וזהו מה שיכינו בדרוש הזה.

God⁴⁰ and other issues: when there is no intellectual evidence for any side of a given issue, we turn to what is said in the Scriptures and tradition, and this shows us which of the options – all of which are possible in terms of the intellectual evidence – should be chosen. From here we see that intellectual evidence stands at a higher level of certainty given that one is to turn to the tradition and the text of the Torah only when the intellectual evidence is insufficient for deciding regarding competing opinions. If there was clear intellectual evidence for one of the sides of a given debate, R. Crescas would, apparently, interpret the tradition according to the more reliable intellectual evidence than the explicit (but can be interpreted in divers' ways) words of the Torah or the words of the Sages.

Regarding most issues, R. Crescas interprets what is said in the Torah in light of intellectual proofs, therefore it is impossible to see in these cases which of the two (i.e. tradition vs. philosophy) is more reliable because he presents all the sources as compatible with each other. Only in the case of the absence of intellectual proofs (as in the issue of the unity of God and the issue of the existence of multiple universes) or in the case of an explicit conflict (as we will see later regarding free choice) is it possible to see which source has a higher level of reliability.

In one case, regarding the question of free choice, R. Crescas agrees that the correct position should not be openly disseminated. According to him, causal determinism is a secret that should not be made public lest it cause the masses to generally despair that their efforts have any real effect, leading to serious social dysfunction⁴¹. From this we can learn two important things for this discussion:

1. The Torah sometimes takes an incorrect position for educational purposes.
2. It follows from #1 that in the event of a conflict between an intellectual proof and what is taught in the Torah and by the Sages⁴², the intellectual proof is considered the more credible because it

cannot be interpreted non-literally. In such a case, what is written in the Torah and the writings of the Sages become the official message given to the masses for educational purposes, while the conclusions of the philosophical line of thought become the true (and correct) secret message of the Torah.

According to R. Crescas, these secrets can also be seen in the Torah and the words of the Sages, but from the order of his arguments it is certainly reasonable to assert that the basis for this interpretation is intellectual proofs and not subtle insights into the text of the Torah or the texts of the Sages.

Since this is ostensibly just a one-off example of R. Crescas positing that there is a true but secret position hidden within the text of the Torah that contradicts the plain meaning, it can be reasonably argued that it is unjustified to learn out from this singular case that R. Crescas's general approach to the reliability of tradition and scripture was to see these as inferior to philosophical insight. However, in my opinion, this argument is itself unjustified because the assertion that this is the only case in which R. Crescas seems to defer to philosophy is imprecise to the point of being essentially incorrect. As we have already detailed, there are a number of places where R. Crescas only advised ignoring philosophical arguments because logical proofs could not reach an indisputable conclusion. We saw this in his discussion of the unity of God and the existence of multiple universes. So, I would argue that R. Crescas quite clearly believed in the primacy of philosophical inquiry over tradition. I would also argue that given the absence of an explicit discussion of the reliability of the various sources of beliefs, researchers and other thoughtful readers who wish to ascertain R. Crescas's opinion on this point really have no alternative other than to make inferences from R. Crescas's implicit references to the reliability of tradition versus philosophy⁴³.

Therefore, it can be concluded that according to R. Crescas, there are four levels of belief that vary according to their reliability. Belief based only on generally accepted notions (including the agreement of the Sages) is inferior in relation to the various types of logical proofs (but also in relation to witnessing miracles and experiencing prophecy, which are identical in terms of their reliability to the different levels of logical proofs). Reliance on generally accepted notions is

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 115-116 (Book 1, part 3, chapter 4)

⁴¹ On the subject of the secret determinism in the thought of R. Crescas, see Stav 2018. Regarding his use of the Hebrew word for 'disseminate' (נפיש) in *Or Hashem*, it is worth noting that he usually employs the term in the positive context of the general public's edification, such as: spreading the opinion that God has necessary existence (p. 104), teaching that Balaam the prophet was crooked (p. 200), publicizing of various miracles (pp. 201-202), spreading of God's reputation amongst the Gentiles via the Jewish Diaspora (p. 203), description of Greek wisdom as well-known (p. 205), popular belief in divine justice (p. 344), informing of Pharaoh of the miracles he would witness (p. 357), prophetic insight being expanded to include an array of political and military leaders via the Urim and Thummim (p. 363), and the fact that physics and metaphysics are familiar to the public – unlike the kabbalistic concepts of the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot, which the sages chose to guard from the general public (pp. 408-409).

⁴² Such tradition-based sources of knowledge are by definition examples of generally accepted notions that have become widely disseminated amongst the public. Since R. Crescas focuses here on the potential conflict between logical proofs and traditions (i.e. accepted notions), it would seem that for him, evidence based on a miracle, and of course prophecy, is more reliable than evidence based on accepted notions like traditions. Despite this, I don't think there is an actual case in which R. Crescas points to a contradiction between tra-

ditional knowledge and knowledge gained from miracles or prophecy.

⁴³ The possibility that R. Crescas considered all the sources of belief to be equal – and never questioned the reliability of tradition – is in my opinion simply not realistic, for as we saw earlier in the Passover Sermon, R. Crescas paid close attention to the subject of the various degrees of reliability of the general sources of belief, which in principle covers all sources of belief, including tradition. It would therefore seem most likely that he also had an opinion about the reliability of the tradition but chose not to write about it explicitly for various reasons (which we will attempt to unravel in the summary of the article). Furthermore, we note that in his citing of Biblical and rabbinic traditions that R. Crescas consistently limits their applicability to cases where purely rational considerations alone afford only conclusions of low reliability. Indeed, we never find in *Or Hashem* a case where R. Crescas rejected a solid intellectual argument in favor of a scriptural text or oral tradition.

usually reserved for religious topics (especially the existence of one providential deity) or trivial topics (such as the nature of demons). And there are other such topics found in the fourth book of *Or Hashem* for which there is no religious obligation to hold a certain position towards them. Regarding these issues, R. Crescas thinks that there is no reason to reject what is written in the Torah, even though the degree of certainty regarding the issues raised in the Torah is much less than the certainty that is associated with logical proofs.

4. Concluding Remarks

I would now like to sum up what I have hopefully demonstrated in this paper. First, R. Hasdai Crescas divided belief into four different types according to the degree of reliability:

1. Irrefutable proofs and experiencing prophecy
2. Reasonable logical proofs and witnessing miracles that have no earthly explanation
3. Less likely proofs and miracles of a dubious nature
4. Accepting the plain meaning of the text of the Torah and tradition in general

According to our discussion here, it is possible to understand why R. Crescas did not explicitly present in the Passover Sermon during his discussion of the different types of belief the notion of faith that arises from acceptance of tradition and Scripture, nor did he discuss the place of tradition in his theory of cognition, thereby departing from the approaches of Aristotle in the *Topics* and Rambam in the *Words of Logic*. R. Crescas thought that publishing his true position regarding the degree of reliability of commonly accepted notions could have a negative effect on the masses of the believing people, whom he was sincerely concerned might become deterred from practicing the religion due to harm to their faith caused by his position, which asserts that the reliability of certain key religious positions (especially the existence of one God and issues related mainly to providence) is not particularly high, and because of this, they are subject to a certain amount of doubt⁴⁴. Because of this, R.

⁴⁴ Maimonides in *Guide* II:66 has, at least on the exoteric level, a similar description of the creation of the world. On the problem of the literal understanding of Maimonides, see Sadik 2021. On the subject of the creation of the world and the main research and interpretive controversies surrounding the topic, see Lemler 2015. It should be noted that according to our analysis, the implicit position of R. Crescas is that one should accept the literal claims of the Torah and of the Sages only where there is no demonstrable proof to the contrary, but that where such irrefutable proof is available, the dictates of logic take precedence even over traditional religious beliefs. This position is identical to Maimonides' explicit position, though only like his esoteric position as understood by the adherents of the extreme naturalistic interpretation of Maimonides, such as found in the medieval writings of R. Moses of Narbonne and R. Yosef Ibn Caspi, or in modern analyses, such as that of Colette Sirat. According to these philosophers, Maimonides held an even more extreme position than did R. Crescas, to wit, that there are irrefutable proofs according to which the universe is eternal. It is interesting to note that, according to the radical reading, each of the thinkers who concealed their true beliefs nevertheless allowed the precise reader to perceive his true intention, which was always one step further in the philosophical direction than as would appear from a straight-forward reading of their works. However, the extent of concealment differed from one thinker to the

Crescas preferred to refrain from openly revealing his position. That is why in his Passover Sermon he did not analyze generally accepted notions, tradition, and the written Torah in his discussion of the various sources of faith and their reliability. By contrast, in *Or Hashem* he did not even discuss the various levels of belief, even though he utilized a significant portion of the materials found in the Passover Sermon. Despite this, R. Crescas's radical position favoring rational arguments over tradition can certainly be seen emerging from his discussions in the Passover Sermon and *Or Hashem*, individually as well as from their juxtaposition.

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next. For example, Maimonides' esoteric approach included intentionally contradicting himself, while R. Crescas used no such tactics and allowed his audience to readily understand his more radical positions without mentioning them explicitly. On the question of esotericism in the Middle Ages see, among others: Schwartz 2002.