Abraham b. Hiyya (or perhaps more correctly Hayya) lived in Huesca and Barcelona, and died after 1145. He was a polymath whose prodigious output of work was more typical of the scholarship of al-Andalus than of Christian Spain; in fact, he or his family may have originated in al-Andalus, although his knowledge of Arabic was probably acquired in Aragón. He is particularly famous for his scientific and astronomical-astrological works, most of which have been edited and translated by the renowned J. M. Millás Vallicrosa (see my Dictionary, pp. 81-85 for his works). He also wrote two philosophical, or perhaps more correctly “theological”, works, Hegayon ha-nefesh (“Meditation of the soul”) and Megiyllat ha-Megalleh (“Scroll of the revealing”); MillásVallicrosa translated it (Catalan) as Llibre revelador. Scholarly attention has focused chiefly on his mathematical and astrological writing, with some attention also to the latter work but very little on Megiyllat ha-Megalleh.

The present remarkable study is the work of a Finnish scholar, written in impeccable English. The three introductory chapters, discussing what is known, or conjectured, of Abraham’s life, central themes in the book, and surveying scholarly ideas about all of this, already indicates the author’s thorough knowledge of Hebrew sources and secondary literature to the present time.

Following the introductory chapters, which very much deserve careful attention as they are the fruit of thorough research and balanced judgement, the main part of the book consists of what is so popularly called these days “close reading” of the text. This consists of detailed analysis of each chapter of the work. For example, ch. 5 discusses Abraham’s concept of Time, which is almost exactly that of Aristotle (the measure of motion), although the author correctly expands on this that it differs in that Abraham is concerned with time “linked to the motion from potentiality to actuality”, that is, more a metaphysical than physical definition. Particularly interesting is ch. 7, in which the author discusses, among other things, Abraham’s position on resurrection in the context of other relevant views and suggests that his “antagonist” in the discussion is Petrus Alfonsus (fortunately, the correct form of his name is used, and not “Pedro Alfonso”), who argued against the general Jewish belief concerning resurrection (pp. 194-95; see also Appendix 2, p. 448 ff.). This is not the only place where the author points to the Jewish convert as antagonist in Abraham’s treatise, such as the notion of the “fall” of man and original sin. Here, the novelty of Abraham’s belief that a specific soul was created in Adam and transmitted from him to only one worthy individual in each generation to come (pp. 232-33) is remarkable. I am unaware of any similar idea in a medieval Jewish source.

The author has a thorough knowledge not only of Hebrew sources but Arabic as well, as is demonstrated particularly in ch. 8 on Abraham’s eschatological view of the history of the Jews (see p. 272 ff. on comparison with Muslim writings). Ch. 9 analyzes his astrological views with regard to the final redemption. Abraham was not an astrological determinant, but believed in the conditional nature of astrology. Everything finally is dependent on the will of God. This is the longest and most complex chapter of the book, in which the author demonstrates a remarkable amount of knowledge of astrology in general and specifically in the thought of Abraham.
This is a book of major significance, adding greatly to our knowledge and appreciation of one of the outstanding medieval Jewish scholars. There is nothing whatever to fault in this study, or to add to it. We can only hope for further work from this brilliant young scholar.

Norman Roth