Ibn Ezra’s Five Ways

In the general introduction to his Torah Commentary (standard/short), Ibn Ezra introduces five methodologies (דרכים) of scriptural exegesis, four of which he considers mistaken (to different degrees), and the fifth of which he describes as his own preferred method; these are expanded upon somewhat in his later Introduction to the Torah Commentary (alternate/long). Ibn Ezra uses the metaphor of a circle to describe the relative proximity of the five ways to the most correct understanding of the text. The center point of the circle represents the correct understanding.

1. דרך האחת ארורה ורחבה...ובו דרכו גדולים, והמה חכמי הישיבות במלכות ישמעאלים
The way of the geonim – endlessly circling around the bounding line of the circle, as far from the center as possible while being part of the circle

2. דרך המ"ה...דרר הצודקים
The way of Karaites – they believe themselves to be at the center

3. ...הדרך הג' דרך חשך ואפלה...והם הבודאים מלבם לכול הדברים סודים, ואומנם כי התורה ומשפטייה חידה
The way of allegory and figurative language (as used by Christians) – these interpreters are outside of the circle

4. דרך הרביעית...זאת דרך החכמים, בארצות יונים ואדומים
The way of midrash as used by exegetes in Christian Europe – they are close to the center, much closer than the first three;

5. דרך לגביית...יושרים עיניים...אחת צידי דקדוק כמלגלגל, ואחרא כל אפרשים כי איש חשי יד...רק
The way of peshat – at the center point of the circle; the correct method of understanding Tanakh, without contradicting rabbinic tradition