Les méthodes de travail de Gersonide et le maniement du savoir chez les scolastiques edited by Colette Sirat, Sara Klein-Braslavy, and Olga Weijers

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Levi ben Gershom, known as Gersonides (1288–1344), was one of the most influential Medieval Jewish philosophers, and surely the most renowned among Hebrew-writing Jewish authors active in Provence during the Late Middle Ages. Possibly born in Orange (now in the French department of Vaucluse), he spent all his life near the area of the Rhone Delta; for a period he was at the papal court, then in Avignon, where he acted as an official astronomer and astrologer—and maybe as a physician too. Many of Gersonides' minor works are of scientific interest since they concern the different fields of logic, arithmetic, geometry, musicology, and astronomy; however, his major and best-known writings, in approximate chronological order, are the following:

- a series of 'super-commentaries', that is, commentaries on Averroes' commentaries on most of Aristotle's works. These super-commentaries were written between 1320 and 1324, and in them Gersonides worked out the main lines of his personal interpretation of Medieval Islamic and Jewish Aristotelianism
- a major philosophical and scientific work in six books, *The Wars of the Lord*, whose first version was begun in 1317 and concluded in 1329, though probably revised just before the death of the author. In this work, usually regarded as Gersonides' masterpiece, several key questions of Medieval Jewish philosophy concerning the relationship between Aristotelianism and the tenets of Judaism are dealt with—namely, the immortality of human

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soul, the nature of Biblical prophecy, God's knowledge and providence, the nature of heavens, the creation and 'durability' of the world

- a wide-ranging commentary on the Hebrew Bible that was written in the period 1325–1338. In this commentary, Gersonides analyzes the Biblical text in the light of his own philosophical and scientific thought.

In one of the most complete and innovative works on this author that has appeared in the last fifteen years [Freudenthal 1992], Gersonides has been defined a 'philosopher-scientist'. In fact, he might well be regarded as one of the first European 'scientists' in the modern sense of this term, due to his original approach to natural and mathematical sciences. While most of his contemporary Jewish and Christian philosophers were interested in those sciences simply as branches of Aristotelian philosophy (which included logic, physics, mathematics, metaphysics, and ethics) and used them primarily to gloss Aristotle's writings, Gersonides explicitly studied science for its own sake as an independent way of arriving at philosophical truth. He even seems to have applied to the study of natural science and astronomy some elements of the experimental methods which were systematically applied to European science three centuries later after Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei. In this way, he arrived at some original conclusions which were in contrast with traditional Aristotelian physics.

In reality, not all of Gersonides' original conclusions were totally new in Late-Medieval European thought: for example, some of them appear to be similar to analogous doctrines developed by such major proponents of the so-called 'new physics' as the Latin Schoolmen, William Ockham and John Buridan, who were active in the first half of the 14th century. This fact raises a question about relationship, if any, between Gersonides and contemporary Christian culture—a question also posed in the case of other Provençal Jewish philosophers of this period, such as Gersonides' friend, Yedaʿayah ha-Penini of Béziers (1285–1340), and Gersonides' opponent, Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles (1292–1340). Were these philosophers able to read the Latin works of their Christian colleagues or were they at least in personal contact with Christian thinkers so that they could learn their doctrines and be inspired by them in writing their own

works? Or did the peculiarities of their thought result from independent, though parallel, developments based upon the interpretation of the same sources, viz the works of Arabo-Islamic Aristotelianism by Averroes and Avicenna? This question has been long debated, and a definitive and generally accepted answer to it has yet to be found.

The chief aim of this book is to discuss and give a tentative answer to the question of Gersonides' relationship to Latin Scholasticism. The book itself has its origins in a seminar held in Paris at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 18 January to 15 February 1999, in which the editors participated. Most of the book is written by the three editors (Sirat and Klein-Braslavy for the Hebrew side, Weijers for the Latin side) but some subjects have been treated by other specialists. Ruth Glasner deals with Gersonides' physics and natural sciences, José Luis Mancha discusses Gersonides' astronomy, and Gilbert Dahan writes about Medieval Christian Biblical exegesis. Finally, Gad Freudenthal takes on the role of an 'opponent' by challenging the major thesis supported by the editors.

As I have said, the core of the book is the relationship between Gersonides and contemporary Latin exegesis, philosophy, and science. The traces of this relationship must be found, if they exist, in the methods followed by Gersonides in his main works (that is, the super-commentaries, *The Wars of the Lord*, and the Biblical commentaries), rather than in explicit, direct, literal references to Scholastic authors and doctrines, since there are no such references in his writings. Accordingly, the book begins with a general introduction [9–58] which discusses similarities and differences between 14th-century Jewish and Christian cultures in Provence. Sirat and Weijers compare the different structures of the Jewish academies (the *yeshivot*), where philosophy and science, as a rule, were not taught, with the Christian universities (although Gersonides' curriculum, according to Sirat, would be more like that for a student at a Christian university than that for a typical Jewish student), as well as the different literary genres as they are found in Medieval Jewish Aristotelianism and in Christian Scholasticism. Mancha comments on Gersonides' astronomical works, which were probably written at the request of Christian patrons. Next [59–103], Klein-Braslavy and Glasner examine Gersonides' methods as a commentator of Averroes and, indirectly, of Aristotle. Both conclude that his super-commentaries were written for didactic purposes (it appears that Gersonides taught philosophy,

although not in an institutional setting) as well as for 'providing the conceptual basis of his main project, the *Wars*' [102].

Then [105–192], some authors in this collection focus on the similarities between Gersonides' methods of philosophical analysis in his *Wars of the Lord* and the methods current in contemporary Scholasticism. Klein-Braslavy explains, through a careful examination of textual evidence, what she calls 'Gersonides' diaporematic method'. This method, which might even have come to his mind by way of personal contacts in his Christian milieu, was, apparently, an original Jewish parallel of the Latin *quaestio disputata* (whose structure and methods as found in 13th- and 14th-century universities are treated by Weijers [see 135–149]). Finally, some examples of 'questions' similar, although not identical, to the Scholastic *quaestiones* as found in Gersonides' *Wars* are examined and summarized by Sirat, Klein-Braslavy, and Weijers. Next [193–280], Klein-Braslavy and Sirat study the methods followed by Gersonides in his Biblical commentaries (his original partition of the Biblical text, the different senses he ascribes to it, and the theoretical and practical conclusions or 'utilities' that he finds in each passage). Dahan compares these methods to those found in contemporary Christian Biblical exegesis and points out some interesting similarities between them—although, according to him, there is no evident dependence of the former on the latter.

Chapters 4–5 [281–324] are explicitly patterned after a Scholastic *quaestio*. In chapter 4, Glasner and Sirat try to answer the key question of the book by pointing to the existence of a relationship between Gersonides and contemporary Christian scholars not only in general methods but even in some doctrinal points. According to Glasner, Gersonides shows knowledge of two typically Scholastic doctrines: that quantity is composed of indivisible parts, a thesis maintained by Walter Burley (1275–1344); and that there is a difference between place and surface, a thesis held by pseudo-John Duns Scotus.[1] In chapter 5, Freudenthal challenges both the existence of

[1] It should be noticed that the commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* which Glasner [285–286] ascribes to John Duns Scotus is surely not by Scotus: it might be by Marsilius of Inghen (d. 1396) and, if so, its contents could not have been known to Gersonides.

such a relationship and its relevance for the development of Gersonides' thought and work; and Sirat and Klein-Braslavy give a short reply to his objections.

The book concludes [325–356] with English and French translations by Menahem Kellner, Moïse Darmon, and Colette Sirat of some of Gersonides' introductions to his Biblical commentaries, and a bibliography of works cited in the book [357–375].

About the main question debated in this book, some observations are in order. Surely, Gersonides was not a 'Hebrew Schoolman' (that is, a strict follower of Scholastic methods, doctrines, and philosophical terminology) whose only difference from his Christian colleagues was that he expressed himself in Hebrew rather than in Latin, just as some Italian and Spanish Jewish philosophers in the 14th and 15th centuries did. Gersonides does not explicitly quote any Latin philosopher, and he makes only generic and obscure references to the opinions of some 'later' or 'modern' thinkers (*aharonim* or *mit'aherim*). Moreover, as Freudenthal rightly observes [312], such knowledge of Scholasticism that Gersonides might have had appears limited to some very particular and circumscribed points: there is, for instance, no sign that Gersonides knew the general outlines of Thomas Aquinas' or Duns Scotus' philosophy, or even some key doctrines of 14th-century Latin astronomy. Finally, there is no evidence that Gersonides was able to read Latin—his main astronomical work had to be translated into Latin by a Christian scholar. Indeed, such knowledge of Latin that he had was perhaps indirect, that is, not through the reading of Latin texts but through oral conversations with Christian scholars which might well have taken place while he was in Avignon at the papal court. In point of fact, the same is substantially valid for most of the 14th-century Jewish philosophers active in Provence who appear to have had some knowledge of contemporary Scholasticism, philosophers such as Yeda^{c}ayah ha-Penini, as Sirat and Klein-Braslavy affirm [324]. Still, in my view there is no warrant to conclude from the paucity or even apparent absence of explicit evidence, that Gersonides really ignored contemporary Latin philosophy and science, as Freudenthal does [314–316].

Still, Freudenthal is right to maintain that Gersonides was a 'solitary genius' [315], provided that we take this expression to stress Gersonides' originality rather than to affirm that he was a total stranger

to the cultural trends of his time. As a matter of fact, given this book it seems to me that we should not conclude that Scholasticism was in fact a determining factor in Gersonides' philosophical and scientific thought. What the book shows instead is that Scholastic philosophy and science *may* have acted as one stimulus among many of Gersonides' thought, although the way and the extent to which they accomplished this function remain obscure to us.

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