

Seymour Feldman. *Gersonides: Judaism within the Limits of Reason.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. x + 254 pp. \$59.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-904113-44-7.



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Gersonides' Judaism within the Limits of Reason—Creation, Divine Attributes, and Providence

Near the end of his academic career Marvin Fox brought together his many years of studying and teaching Maimonides into a single volume. To this day, some twenty years later, Fox's *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (1990) is the single best introduction to a study of Maimonides's philosophy that any serious student can read. The same can be said now for Seymour Feldman's *Gersonides: Judaism within the Limits of Reason*. While scholars may quarrel with many of the specifics of Feldman's interpretations, as they can and do with Fox's readings of Maimonides, without question Feldman presents a superb summary of the totality of Gersonides's Jewish philosophy in a single volume that is carefully reasoned and clearly written. Certainly no philosophers or intellectual historians of medieval thought can consider themselves academically literate without at least some familiarity with the writings of Gersonides, and Feldman does a better job than anyone else in providing a reliable foundation for that minimal philosophical knowledge. His book should become

a standard text, together with Fox's on Maimonides, for any first course in Jewish philosophy and is highly recommended as a Jewish resource in any general course in medieval philosophy. What follows below is a summary of Feldman's summaries with a few critical remarks for readers to consider while savoring Feldman's mature and learned writings.

Gersonides was born in Orange in Provence in 1288 and died in 1344. His major writings are a single topical philosophic treatise (*The Wars of the Lord*), commentaries on many of the books of the Hebrew scriptures (viz., the five scrolls, the former prophets, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, the five Books of Moses), and extensive commentaries on Hebrew translations of Averroes's commentaries on the books of Aristotle. His topics include every issue of importance in medieval Jewish, Muslim, and Christian philosophy and theology, as well as original scholarship on topics in the sciences, especially astronomy (based on Ptolemy) and mathematics (based on Euclid). Gersonides's place in the history of Western civilization rests primarily on his work both as

an astronomer and as a philosopher, but Feldman focuses primarily on Gersonides the medieval rationalist philosopher whose writings were read by and primarily directed towards an educated and spiritually committed rabbinic Jewish audience.

It is of interest to note that Feldman disregards completely what used to be the standard assumption that Gersonides was an astronomer and an astrologer who in these capacities must have been somehow connected with Christian academic studies in these areas in Avignon. Feldman's sole reference to a profession is a non-committal citation of Joseph Shatzmiller's judgment that Gersonides was a moneylender. On this subject Feldman has nothing else to say. However, if (for example) Gersonides was not an astronomer, how could he have written such a sophisticated and original account of the geocentric theory of cosmology as Bernard Goldstein presents in his writings on Gersonides's science? Similarly, if Gersonides was not an astronomer, why was the development of the so-called Jacob's staff—the most sophisticated tool for measuring relative distances between stars prior to the invention of the telescope—attributed to Gersonides?

Feldman summarizes every central philosophical-theological topic in the total corpus of Gersonides's writings. As Feldman presents them the topics to be explained are the following: (1) cosmic creation, (2) divine attributes, (3) divine omniscience, (4) divine providence, (5) divine omnipotence, (6) prophecy, (7) humanity and its destiny, and (8) the Torah. The space allowed for this review prohibits any detailed comments on any of Feldman's specific arguments. Instead I will limit my remarks to the briefest of summaries of Feldman's first three summaries with a few (very few) suggestions of ways that other Gersonides's scholars may expand Feldman's analysis.

Against Aristotle and Averroes in particular, Gersonides rejected the claim that the universe as a whole is eternal and he affirmed its creation, but against Maimonides and what was then the standard interpretation of creation, Gersonides defended the Platonic claim that the universe is everlasting, and offered detail demonstrations (both philosophical and scientific) in support of his position. These arguments receive more attention (quantitatively) in the body of Gersonides's writings (viz., twenty-nine chapters in the final version of the Wars) than any other topic that Gersonides discussed. Feldman highlights the originality of Gersonides's cosmogony. While openly influenced by non-

Jewish philosophers such as Platonists, Aristotelians, and Muslim theologians, Gersonides did not blindly follow any of them. It is of interest to note that in developing his general argument Gersonides, like Maimonides, uses a version of a Kalam argument known as the particularization argument (pg. 37), which itself entails a radical (modernist) form of atomistic and occasionalist physics (pg. 38). In other words Gersonides seems to be at least hinting that the accepted particularization argument for creation entails in some sense the kind of radical departure from the medieval framework that characterized the modernist scientific philosophies of Spinoza and his contemporaries. This is a fascinating suggestion (which I think is correct) but Feldman's discussion of the topic is far too brief to reveal the hinted-at entailment. Feldman's final discussion in connection with Gersonides's commitment to a continuously created/re-created cosmos is the logic of the entailed claim of an endless actual past. Of course such an actuality would have to be infinite, and premodern mathematics had no tools to make sense out of such a claim. Nor does Feldman make sense out of it. Instead he merely points to the possibility of such an account with the development by Georg Cantor of transfinite numbers (p. 44).

Gersonides's deity transcends the physical universe, but somehow Gersonides establishes God as a formal paradigm that functions causally in the lives of terrestrial beings. Given this explanation, the question becomes how on this model to make intelligible the religious claim that God speaks his commandments. Gersonides lists three non-literal equivocal positions on the meaning of these terms, viz., that they are homonymous or absolutely equivocal, or metaphorical, or ambiguous (p. 71). Maimonides, like Plotinus (Feldman does not go so far as to assert an actual causal connection here) opted for homonyms for all non-action affirmative attributions to God, and Gersonides opts for ambiguous predication in general. The form of ambiguity advocated by Gersonides is where a term (e.g., 'healthy') applies primarily to one kind of subject in a sense called *apriori* and secondarily in a derivative way to another kind of subject in a sense called *aposteriori*. Feldman notes that 'sometimes Aristotle designates this semantic relationship by the term *analogy*' (p. 73) but Feldman says little more to explain what Gersonides means. He says nothing about how this kind of relational use of a term attributed to subjects is distinct and different from other expressions of analogy.

Feldman bases his discussion of Gersonides's theory of divine omniscience on Akiba's cryptic pronouncement that 'All is foreseen; yet freedom is given' (Mish-

nah Avot 3:5), which Feldman interprets as an apparent contradiction between the affirmation of human freedom of choice and divine perfect knowledge of everything. Gersonides's solution turns on the ambiguity of the term *âallâ*. On Gersonides's constructive reading of Akiba, *âallâ* means in general and not in each and every specific case. Hence, God can have a general knowledge of future contingents because this kind of knowledge does not logically compromise their contingency. Correctly sensing that his position is controversial among faithful Jews, Gersonides cites in support the words of the exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra in connection with Gen 18:21 which express the same position as his own.

However, as Feldman points out, Gersonides's position gained no known support from his fellow medieval Jewish thinkers (p. 99). Gersonides fares no better with contemporary historians of Jewish philosophy such as Isaac Husik and Colette Sirat (p. 99), but Feldman himself expresses a certain amount of respect for Gersonides's position, or at least enough support to say that *âGersonides's stance does not appear to be so radical or novelâ* (p. 101), which is in Feldman's terms a form of scholastic *âcompatibisticâ* theory (viz., that human freedom in a weak sense is compatible with divine omniscience in a strong sense) that was not uncommon among Christian scholastics of the period.

In his conclusion Feldman relates Gersonides's philosophy of Judaism to the modern general philosophies of religion of Immanuel Kant, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Leo Strauss, and Hermann Cohen. In different ways from these modern philosophers of religion, Gersonides also presents a picture of a rationalist Judaism that is, with respect to Jewish tradition, heterodox. As Hasdai Crescas and Isaac Abravanel argued, Gersonides's harmonistic Jewish philosophy is heterodox in at least three respects. First, Gersonides positing of a *âformless bodyâ* out of which the universe was created makes him more of a dualist than an orthodox monist. Second, Gersonides gives purely naturalistic explanations of all biblical miracles. Third, Gersonides's denial that God knows individuals as particulars and his exclusion of future contingents from

the domain of divine knowledge clearly is heterodox.

However, Feldman argues that Gersonides's theology is even more heterodox, and therefore more modern, than even these three legitimate complaints from late medieval and early modern rabbinic philosophers suggest. On Feldman's interpretation, Gersonides comes as close as a premodern Jewish philosopher could to giving scientific claims epistemic priority over the written words of the Hebrew scriptures. Still, Feldman's Gersonides remains a medieval (i.e., a premodern) Jewish philosopher who, while he cannot in principle easily *âdismissâ* science, can instead interpret the words of the scriptures *âad libitumâ*. We can no longer accept his science as science, for it is as limited as are his Bible readings in the modern world. (Aristotle is not an improvement on the authors of the scriptures for truth claims.)

What we can learn from Gersonides, Feldman urges, is his *âgeneral principle that reason should function as a control of what we believe has some interesting and important implications for the modern readerâ* (p. 213). More concretely, *âGersonides's account of divine providence too seems to offer a better explanation of natural evils than any of the traditional doctrinesâ*. Furthermore, *âGersonides doctrine of the shapeless primordial body out of which the world was created offers a more believable account of the various imperfections of nature that cause sufferingâ* (p. 234).

None of these assertions are fully explained, so it is not as clear as it could be why these three claims in particular should be taken seriously today by constructive Jewish (or Christian for that matter) modern theologians and philosophers, and these points go to the heart of the key criticism of Feldman's study. What he does well is present accurate and reliable summaries of a wide variety of texts, but a summary can never be sufficient to show the argument in favor of a position, especially when the positions are as subtle and complex as Gersonides's positions in cosmogony, theology, epistemology, cosmic providence, divine knowledge, prophecy, human destiny, and revealed Jewish law.

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