

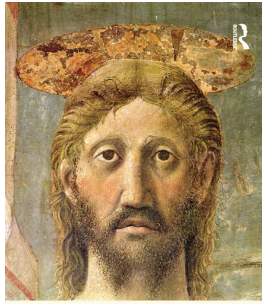
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 31 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION  
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS  
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## Medieval Philosophy of Religion

Graham Oppy, N. N. Trakakis

### Gersonides

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729626.ch16>

Tamar Rudavsky

**Published online on: 31 Jul 2013**

**How to cite :-** Tamar Rudavsky. 31 Jul 2013, *Gersonides from: Medieval Philosophy of Religion*  
Routledge

Accessed on: 31 Mar 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729626.ch16>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## 16

## GERSONIDES

Tamar Rudavsky

Levi ben Gershom, also called Gersonides (1288–1344), has emerged in recent years as one of the most significant and comprehensive medieval Jewish philosophers. He has been constantly quoted (even if only to be criticized), and, through the works of Hasdai Crescas and others, Gersonides' ideas have influenced such thinkers as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (*see* Vol. 3, Ch. 13) and Baruch Spinoza (*see* Vol. 3, Ch. 11). Emphasizing Gersonides' "religious rationalism in Judaism", Seymour Feldman describes Gersonides as one who "has taken seriously the fact that he has reason, who believes that this faculty is God-given, and who attempts to understand God with this instrument" (Gersonides 1984: 52). Attempting to show that philosophy and Torah or reason and revelation are co-extensive, Gersonides is a philosophical optimist who believes that reason is fully competent to attain all the important and essential truths in religion. And yet, at the same time, perhaps no other medieval Jewish philosopher has been so maligned over the centuries as Gersonides. Indeed, his major philosophical work *Milhamot Ha-Shem* (Wars of the Lord; hereafter *Wars*) was called 'Wars against the Lord' by one of his opponents, and was depicted as a radical rejection of traditional Jewish tenets.

Gersonides left few letters and does not talk about himself in his writings, nor is his life discussed at great length by his contemporaries. Hence, what is known of his biography is sketchy at best. Gersonides was born in Provence and may have lived for a time in Bagno sur-Ceze. Gersonides spoke Provencal; his works, however, are all written in Hebrew, and all of his quotations from Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Aristotle and Moses Maimonides are in Hebrew as well. One of the most prolific medieval Jewish philosophers, his output covers a variety of fields, including mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, logic, biblical commentaries, and philosophical commentaries on Averroes. His *Sefer Ma'aseh Hoshev* (The work of a counter; 1321) is concerned with arithmetical operations and uses of a symbolic notation for numerical variables. Gersonides' major scientific contributions in astronomy are contained primarily in book 5, part 1 of *Wars*, in which he reviewed and criticized astronomical theories of the day, compiled astronomical tables and

described one of his astronomical inventions. This instrument, which he named *Megalle`amuqqot* (Revealer of profundities) and which was called *Bacullus Jacob* (Jacob's staff) by his Christian contemporaries, was used to measure the height of stars above the horizon. Although there exists no explicit evidence that Gersonides read Latin, he may have learned of the views of Ockham, Nicholas Oresme and other scholastic thinkers in oral conversations with his Christian contemporaries (Sirat *et al.* 2003). There is some evidence that Gersonides had connections with high-ranking Christians during his lifetime. In 1342 Gersonides dedicated to Pope Clement VI the Latin version of a trigonometric treatise drawn from his astronomy. The astronomical parts of *Wars* were translated into Latin during Gersonides' lifetime, possibly at the request of the Papal court (Freudenthal 1996: 741). Also in 1342, Philippe de Vitry (future Bishop of Meaux) asked his advice about a mathematical theorem in connection with his own *ars nova* in musical theory (Chemla & Pahaut 1992). One of the craters of the moon, Rabbi Levi, is named after him. Gersonides also wrote philosophical commentaries on Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle. His innovative work in logic, *Sefer Ha-heqesh Ha-yashar* (Book of the correct syllogism; 1319), examines the problems associated with Aristotle's modal logic as developed in the *Prior Analytics*, and was translated into Latin at an early date, although Gersonides' name was not attached to it. Finally, Gersonides contributed to the corpus of philosophical biblical commentaries, including commentaries on the Book of Job (1325), Song of Songs (1326), Ecclesiastes (1328), Esther (1329), Ruth (1329), Genesis (1329), Exodus (1330), most of Leviticus (1332) and finally the remaining books of the Torah (completed in 1338).

## GERSONIDES' PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

### *Faith and reason*

In 1317 Gersonides began an essay on the problem of creation. This problem, which has vexed Jewish philosophers since Philo of Alexandria (*see* Vol. 1, Ch. 9), had recently received elaborate treatment by Maimonides. But Gersonides was dissatisfied with Maimonides' discussion and proposed to reopen the issue. This project was soon laid aside, however, for Gersonides felt that it could not be adequately discussed without proper grounding in the issues of time, motion and the infinite. By 1325 his manuscript had developed to include discussion not only of creation but also of immortality, divination and prophecy. By 1328 it included a chapter on providence as well. Books 5 and 6 were completed, by Gersonides' own dating, by 1329, and the final work was *Wars*. In this work, Gersonides' aim is to integrate the teachings of Aristotle, as mediated through Averroes and Maimonides, with those of Judaism. Gersonides specifies six questions to be examined in rigorous, scholastic fashion. Is the rational soul immortal? What

is the nature of prophecy? Does God know particulars? Does divine providence extend to individuals? What is the nature of astronomical bodies? Is the universe eternal or created? With each issue, Gersonides attempts to reconcile traditional Jewish beliefs with what he feels are the strongest points in Aristotle's philosophy. Although a synthesis of these systems is his ultimate goal, it turns out that philosophy often wins out at the expense of theology.

Adhering to the ability of human beings to attain to an overarching truth comprising all of reality, Gersonides presents a unified cosmology rooted in a thoroughgoing epistemological realism based on reason. Gersonides laid down the general rule that "the Law cannot prevent us from considering to be true that which our reason urges us to believe" (Gersonides 1984: 98). His adherence to this principle is reflected throughout his work. In his introductory remarks to *Wars*, Gersonides upholds the primacy of reason, attributing to Maimonides the position that "we must believe what reason has determined to be true. If the literal sense of the Torah differs from reason, it is necessary to interpret those passages in accordance with the demands of reason" (*ibid.*). Gersonides believes that reason and Torah cannot be in opposition: "if reason causes to affirm doctrines that are incompatible with the literal sense of Scripture, we are not prohibited by the Torah to pronounce the truth on these matters, for reason is not incompatible with the true understanding of the Torah" (*ibid.*). Thus reason is upheld as a criterion for achieving truth. In contradistinction to Maimonides, who introduced allegory, metaphor and imprecise language into his work to convey the ambiguity of the subject matter, Gersonides saw it as his function to elucidate philosophical issues as clearly as possible. He contrasts his method with that of Maimonides, whose *Guide of the Perplexed* (hereafter *Guide*) he saw as unnecessarily obscure and esoteric (*ibid.*: 101).

Furthermore, Gersonides contends that "no argument can nullify the reality that is perceived by the senses, for true opinion must follow reality but reality need not conform to opinion" (Goldstein 1985: 24). That Gersonides clearly considered his own observations to be the ultimate test of his system is explicit from his attitude towards Ptolemy. The importance of empirical observation cannot be underestimated, he claims, and he values his own observations over those of others. "We did not find among our predecessors from Ptolemy to the present day observations that are helpful for this investigation except our own" (*ibid.*: 27), he says in describing his method of collecting astronomical data. Often his observations do not agree with those of Ptolemy, and in those cases he tells us explicitly that he prefers his own. Gersonides lists the many inaccuracies he has found when trying to follow Ptolemy's calculations (*ibid.*: 93ff.). Having investigated the positions of the planets, for example, Gersonides encountered "confusion and disorder", which led him to deny several of Ptolemy's planetary principles (Goldstein 1988: 386). He does warn his colleagues, however, to dissent from Ptolemy only after great diligence and scrutiny.

## DIVINE PREDICATION: ON WHAT WE CAN SAY ABOUT GOD

Turning first to a brief discussion of Gersonides' analysis of divine predication, it is important to note that his comments occur as a response to Maimonides' theory of negative predication. In *Guide* 1.51–60, Maimonides developed an elaborate theory of divine predication, the purpose of which is to claim that human language is inadequate to predicate anything of God. In these chapters Maimonides argued that terms predicated of God must be understood in one of three ways. The first construes such terms as action predicates, descriptive of the “ways and the characteristics” of the deity (Maimonides 1963: 125). From these action predicates we infer corresponding mental states analogous to those states that human beings experience when exhibiting those actions. This leads to his second theoretical point, namely that the four essential attributes of God – life, power, wisdom and will – are of one simple essence; all other attributes are to be conceived either as descriptive of divine action, or as negative attributes. However, even these four attributes, when predicated of God, are used in a homonymous or equivocal sense. The difference between human and divine predicates is qualitative: since the terms are applied by way of perfect homonymity, they admit of no comparison between God and his creatures. In light of the linguistic implications of the doctrine of homonymous predication, Maimonides develops in *Guide* 1.58–60 his celebrated theory of negative predication, arguing that ultimately negative predication alone brings the human mind closer to an understanding of God: “Know that the description of God, may he be cherished and exalted, by means of negations is the correct description” (Maimonides 1963: 134). This third piece of Maimonides' theory of divine predication represents the logical culmination of his theory of language. By ascribing to God terms that do not begin to capture his transcendent nature, human beings are both insulting and denigrating God's true essence. Ultimately silence is the only appropriate linguistic response to divine predication: “silence with regard to You is praise” (*ibid.*: 139).

In response to Maimonides, Gersonides attempts to salvage the ability of human beings to talk meaningfully about God. Gersonides disagrees with Maimonides' doctrine, claiming that divine predicates are to be understood as *pros hen* equivocals rather than absolute equivocals (as Maimonides had argued). What this means is that according to Gersonides, predicates applied to God represent the prime instance or meaning of the term, whereas human predicates are derivative or inferior instances. So, for example, knowledge when applied to God is perfect knowledge and constitutes the standard for human knowledge, which is less perfect than divine knowledge: “the term ‘knowledge’ is predicated of God (may he be blessed) *primarily* and of others *secondarily*” (Gersonides 1987: 107). Gersonides denies that terms have completely different meanings when predicated of God and of human beings; it is only because of an underlying commonality of meaning that we can use language meaningfully at all.

## DIVINE OMNISCIENCE, DETERMINISM AND ASTROLOGY

Turning to the relation between God and the world, Gersonides is able to analyse the details of this relation without violating the linguistic constraints he has established. The general problem is whether God's knowledge is limited to necessary states of affairs or extends to the domain of contingency as well. If the former, then God could not be said to have knowledge of human beings, and so divine providence would not be efficacious. But if God does know contingents, in particular, future contingent events, then it would appear that human freedom is curtailed by God's prior knowledge of human actions. This problem of the apparent conflict between divine omniscience and human freedom was discussed by many medieval philosophers. Gersonides does not follow the majority opinion on this issue: rather than claim that God does know particulars and that this knowledge somehow does not affect human freedom, Gersonides argues that God knows particulars only in a certain sense. In an apparent attempt to mediate between the view of Aristotle, who said that God does not know particulars, and that of Maimonides, who said that God does have such knowledge, Gersonides holds that God knows particulars only in so far as they are ordered. That is, God knows that certain states of affairs are particular, but he does not know in what their particularity consists. God knows individual persons, for example, only through knowing the species humanity.

Whereas Maimonides claimed that God's knowledge does not render the objects of his knowledge necessary, Gersonides maintains that divine knowledge precludes contingency. To retain the domain of contingency, he adopts the one option open to him, namely, that God does not have prior knowledge of future contingents. According to Gersonides, God knows that certain states of affairs may or may not be actualized. But in so far as they are contingent states, he does not know which of the alternatives will be the case. For if God did know future contingents prior to their actualization, there could be no contingency in the world. In an attempt to explain how prophecies are possible in a system that denies the possibility of knowledge of future contingents, Gersonides claims (in book 2) that the prophet does not receive knowledge of particular future events; rather, his knowledge is of a general form, and he must instantiate this knowledge with particular facts. What distinguishes prophets from ordinary persons is that the former are more attuned to receive these universal messages and are in a position to apply them to particular circumstances.

For Gersonides, the issues of divine omniscience, prophecy and contingency must be understood against the backdrop of astrological determinism. Most medieval philosophers accepted the distinction between astronomy as the study of the movements of the celestial bodies and the laws that govern these movements, and astrology as the study of the influence of the celestial bodies on the fates of peoples and individuals. Medieval Jewish philosophers, however, evinced a certain ambivalence toward astrology. Maimonides' trenchant rejection of

astrology occurs against a culture that, at least *prima facie*, did not eliminate either natural or judicial astrology from theoretical considerations. In his *Letter on Astrology*, addressed to the rabbis of southern France, several sorts of considerations are adduced in opposition to astrology.<sup>1</sup> The very fact that Maimonides was called on to legislate on this issue is evidence of the popularity of astrology among Provençal Jews.

Perhaps one of the most outspoken Jewish proponents of astrology is Gersonides, whose astral determinism is explicitly developed in two contexts: in book II of *Wars* he interweaves astrological motifs into his discussion of divine providence and prophecy, while in book V astrology occupies a central role in the context of his cosmological speculations. Y. Tzvi Langermann emphasizes the teleological nature of astrology for Gersonides, its chief merit being its ability to provide “teleological explanations for the wide variety of stellar motions that are observed to take place” (Langermann 1999: 506). Gersonides disagrees with Maimonides over the ultimate purpose of the celestial bodies. For Maimonides it was not possible that a greater entity, the heavens, would exist for the sake of the sublunar universe. Gersonides disagrees, maintaining that it is not inappropriate that the more noble exist for the less noble. The stars, he argues, exist for the sake of things in the sublunar world (Gersonides 1999: 194). More explicitly, the heavenly bodies are designed for the benefit of sublunar existence, and they guarantee the perpetuation of life on earth.

This teleological cosmology is spelled out in *Wars* book 2, in which Gersonides is concerned to explain how divine knowledge operates, and to what extent divine foreknowledge of future contingents affects human choice. His major thesis is that divine knowledge is predicated to a great extent on knowledge of the heavenly bodies, which bodies are in turn “systematically directed toward his [man’s] preservation and guidance so that all his activities and thoughts are ordered by them” (1987: 33). In support of this teleology, Gersonides argues that the celestial bodies have a purpose. This teleology is reflected by a “law, order and rightness” in the universe, implying the existence of an intellect that orders the nature of things: “you see that the domain of the spheres provides, in the best way possible, for the sub-lunar world” (Gersonides 1999: 137).

However, Gersonides must be able to account for individual variety in the sublunar realm. In as much as stellar radiation is the means by which stellar influences are conveyed, the wide variety of mixtures of stellar radiation guarantees a sufficient variety of ‘influences’ on terrestrial processes. The movers emanate from God who is construed as the “First Separate Intellect” (*ibid.*: 272). They are ordered in a rational system that governs the sublunar domain. If there were no one first intellect, Gersonides argues, the rational order we see in the heavens would be the result of chance, which is unacceptable. The agent intellect

---

1. For details of these arguments, see Rudavsky (2000).

thus functions as the link between these celestial bodies and human affairs. The kinds of information it transmits are of an astronomical type, as evidenced in the following example: “it [the agent intellect] knows how many revolutions of the sun, or of the diurnal sphere, or of any other sphere [have transpired] from the time at which someone, who falls under a particular pattern, had a particular level of good or ill fortune” (1987: 53). Gersonides goes on to explain that the information transmitted is of a general nature and does not pertain to the individual *qua* particular. The agent intellect serves as the repository for information communicated by the heavenly bodies. The patterns revealed in this communication between agent intellect and diviner (astrologer, prophet) are from the heavenly bodies, which themselves are endowed with intellects and so “apprehend the pattern that derives from them” (1987: 64). Each mover apprehends the order deriving from the heavenly body it moves, and not patterns that emanate from other heavenly bodies. As a result, the imaginative faculty receives the “pattern inherent in the intellects of the heavenly bodies from the influence deriving from them” (*ibid.*). This influence derives from the position of the heavenly bodies “by the ascendant degree or the dominant planet [in a particular zodiacal position]” (*ibid.*). However, in as much as the heavenly bodies do not jointly cooperate with one another (*lo yishtatfu*) in this process, it is possible for the communication to be misconstrued.

Of course, as we all know, astrologers often err in their predictions. One of the most compelling causes lies in human free will: our intellect and choice “have the power to move us contrary to that which is determined by the heavenly bodies” (*ibid.*: 34). Although Gersonides admits that on occasion human choice is able to contravene the celestial bodies, nevertheless this intervention is rare, and true contingency is a rare state of affairs indeed in Gersonides’ ontology (see Rudavsky 2000). Gersonides presents an argument to show that human choice guided by reason can subvert the celestial bodies despite their general ordering of our lives. The heavenly bodies can order human affairs either by virtue of their difference of position in the heavens, or from the difference of the bodies among themselves. Astral bodies, however, will affect different individuals in different ways; they can also affect an individual differently at different times; and finally, two or more bodies can affect a single individual, resulting in multiple influences that can have contrary effects. Gersonides notes that human beings can contravene these effects: God has provided human beings with “the intellectual capacity (*sekhel ba’al yekholet*) that enables us both to act contrary to what has been ordered by the heavenly bodies and to correct, as far as possible, the [astrally ordained] misfortunes that befall us” (1987: 35). Nevertheless, he assures us that whatever happens by chance is “determined and ordered according to this type of determinateness and order” (*ibid.*: 34). Outdoing even Plato’s hierarchical structuring in *Republic* book 4, Gersonides argues that the ultimate perfection and ordering of society is due to astrological influence (*ibid.*: 36).



## INDIVIDUAL PROVIDENCE, EVIL, AND IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

A further dilemma surrounds the doctrine of divine providence. If God does not have knowledge of future contingents, how can he be said to bestow providence on his creatures; but if God does have knowledge of the future, how do we account for the presence of evil and suffering? This problem is discussed by Gersonides both in book 4 of *Wars* and in his commentary on Job. More specifically, Gersonides is concerned with two issues: the extent of God's providential activity and an explanation of the suffering of the righteous. Maimonides had dealt with both issues in *Guide* 3.17, arguing that individual divine providence extends only to those human beings who have achieved intellectual and moral perfection; providence for other species is only general. Gersonides, however, has already maintained that God cannot know particulars *qua* particular, and so Maimonides' solution is unacceptable to him. Gersonides must therefore revisit the theory of providence within the context of his theory of divine cognition.

In *Wars* 4.1 Gersonides summarizes three general views on providence: the philosophical view of Aristotle according to which there is no individual providence; the traditional Torah view, according to which divine providence extends over each member of the species as human beings; and the view of Maimonides, namely that divine providence extends to some but not all individual human beings. Most of book 4 is addressed to the second view. Gersonides makes use of the Book of Job to elucidate the various positions adduced, as well as to develop a theodicy that explains the existence of suffering and evil. Gersonides takes great pains to explain that his theory of divine cognition does not preclude providence. Gersonides argues that providence is general in nature: it primarily appertains to species and only incidentally to particulars of the species. God, for example, does not know the particular individual Levi ben Gerson and does not bestow particular providence on him. Rather, in as much as Levi ben Gerson is a member of the species humanity and the species philosopher, he is in a position to receive the providential care accorded to those groups. In his Commentary on Job, which complements book 4 of *Wars*, Gersonides claims that each of the characters in the Book of Job represents a different theory of divine providence. Gersonides' own position is a restatement of Elihu's theory that providence is not directed to particulars but rather to groups of individuals, or universals. Summarizing Maimonides' theory, Gersonides sees Maimonides as maintaining that "on Maimonides' theory of providence divine knowledge does not extend to particulars as particulars" (Gersonides 1987: 208).

Gersonides then turns to the more serious issue of theodicy. That instances of evil exist is a fact borne out by sense-experience, which shows "many righteous people suffering great evils most of their lives and receiving very few benefits ... moreover we observe that some righteous men suffer many evils despite their attempt to avert evils from coming to them, but they are not protected from these evils" (*ibid.*: 171). How, then, can we account for the suffering of the righteous? In

order to account for the existence of human suffering, Gersonides distinguishes between 'general providence' that is embedded in nature itself, and 'special providence' that pertains to an individual's spiritual perfection: special providence is enjoyed in direct relation to the level of spiritual perfection attained by an individual. Only few individuals achieve the "kind of unity and conjunction with God" that provides individual providence (*ibid.*: 175). As noted above, those who are more strongly identified with the active intellect receive this communication in a more perfect manner.

But could it not be argued, in contradistinction to Gersonides' position, that God must be either evil or impotent: "[E]ither God (may He be blessed) can arrange it so that a man receives his due reward but He does not attempt to do so, and this would indeed be evil with respect to God (God forbid), or He cannot so arrange this, which also would be an imperfection in God" (*ibid.*: 182). Gersonides' response is twofold. First, he avers that this is the best of all possible worlds, and that this world exhibits "the best possible providential ordering and beneficence for sub-lunar things" (*ibid.*: 183). Secondly, he argues that the benefits of special providence, delegated to only certain individuals, are for the most part deferred to the world to come. What we call 'material evils' are the result ultimately of the material constitution of nature itself. In other words, evil is ultimately the result of matter, over which God has no control. Gersonides states that "evil derives from God only by chance and because of the necessity of matter" (*ibid.*: 167). Examples are adduced to show that evils are caused by chance, or by matter. The evils that befall human beings from the patterns determined by the arrangements of the heavenly bodies are not "essentially [evil] or primarily intended to be [evil]", but rather are chance occurrences not due to God (*ibid.*: 169). "That God cannot prevent or eliminate them [evil] is not a reflection of His impotence; the fact that they occur is a necessary consequence of the world's being what it is, i.e. material" (*ibid.*: 151).

The topic of the immortality of the soul is examined in detail by Gersonides in book 1 of the *Wars* in the context of a general theory of knowledge. This discussion must be understood against the backdrop of a notoriously difficult passage in Aristotle's *On the Soul* III.5. In this passage Aristotle seems to postulate the existence of an active intellect that is separable from the passive intellect and that is primarily responsible for the intellectual activities of the human mind. But what is the relation between the active and passive intellects, and which, if either, is immortal? Gersonides summarizes and criticizes four representative positions on this question. His own view is a version of that of Alexander of Aphrodisias, according to whom the active intellect is associated with the eternal 'agent intellect', that is, God, and is to some extent immortal. Gersonides agrees with Alexander that immortality of the soul consists in the perfection of the human intellect, but he disagrees with Alexander over the precise nature of this intellectual attainment. Unlike Alexander, who emphasized the process of conjunction between the human intellect and the agent intellect, Gersonides argues that the content rather

than the process of knowledge is what matters. When the content of the human intellect mirrors that of the agent intellect, immortality is achieved. This knowledge, according to Gersonides, is of the complete ordering of particulars in the sublunary universe.

#### GERSONIDES ON CREATION

In book 6 of *Wars*, Gersonides turns finally to the question that had originally inspired him to write his work, namely the creation of the universe. Gersonides' discussion of creation reflects his attitude towards previous astronomers, coupled with his faith in human reason. In the *Guide* 2.13–26, Maimonides had gone to great lengths to maintain that the topic of creation was beyond rational demonstration. Gersonides, on the other hand, devotes many chapters in *Wars* book 6 to proving that the Platonic theory of creation out of an eternal formless matter is in fact rationally demonstrable. Further, the two disagree over the relation between the superlunar and sublunar spheres. Maimonides had claimed that no valid inference can be drawn from the nature of the sublunar sphere to that of the superlunar sphere. Gersonides, however, rejects any metaphysical bite to the distinction and argues that in as much as both spheres contain material elements, what we know about creation is based on astronomy, and astronomy is fundamentally no different a human science than physics (Samuelson 1991: 213). Astronomy can only be pursued as a science by “one who is both a mathematician and a natural philosopher, for he can be aided by both of these sciences and take from them whatever is needed to perfect his work” (Goldstein 1985: 23). Gersonides sees the ultimate function of astronomy as understanding God. Astronomy, he tells us, is instructive not only by virtue of its exalted subject matter, but also because of its utility to the other sciences. By studying the orbs and stars, we are led ineluctably to a fuller knowledge and appreciation of God (*ibid.*: 24).

In *Wars* 6.1.2, Gersonides lists three views of his predecessors who discussed the creation of the world. The first, that the world comes into existence and passes away an infinite number of times, has been associated with the rabbis as well as with certain ancient philosophers, such as Heraclitus and Empedocles (as attributed by Aristotle in *On the Heavens* I.10). The second view, that the world was generated only one time, is associated with two sets of proponents: first is the version of Plato that the world was created one time out of some thing, and second is the view attributed to the Islamic *kalām* theologians and to Maimonides, that the world was created out of absolute nothing (Gersonides 1999: 294). The third view is the eternity thesis of Aristotle: that the world is eternal and hence has not been created.

Gersonides' critical refutation of Aristotle's eternity thesis introduces the motif of time and its relation to motion. In contradistinction to Aristotle, who postulated the eternity of time and motion, Gersonides insists that both time

and motion are finite. Gersonides hopes to refute Aristotle's eternity of the world by showing that the infinity of time and motion fail as exceptions to Aristotle's own finitistic universe (Feldman 1967). According to Gersonides, Aristotle offered at least nine arguments in support of the eternity thesis: of these, three have to do with temporality. Aristotle's first argument has to do with the nature of time in general, the second is based on the nature of the 'instant' and the third is based on the nature of temporal language. Gersonides concludes his summary of Aristotle's arguments with two general comments that link the metaphysical considerations to those of a more theological nature. Gersonides offers the suggestion that ultimately what may have motivated Aristotle to support the eternity thesis were theological considerations based on the nature of the deity. First, he argues that it would be inappropriate to suggest that the deity causes at one time rather than at another. Furthermore, it is not appropriate that the deity exist independently of the world that functions as the object of God's self-conception. And finally, Gersonides reminds us, as did Maimonides in the *Guide*, that Aristotle himself did not regard his arguments in favour of eternity as demonstrations but rather as containing fewer doubts than other arguments (Gersonides 1999: 302).

In order to reject Aristotle's eternity thesis, Gersonides must demonstrate the finitude of time. To this end he first makes a number of observations pertaining to the general characteristics of time that will affect his argument. Time, Gersonides argues, falls in the category of continuous quantity. We speak, for example, of the parts of time as being equal or unequal; time itself is measured by convention as opposed to by nature; and its limit is the 'instant' which itself is indivisible (*ibid.*: 329ff.). Further, Gersonides claims that time can be construed both as separate from its substratum and as residing in it. That time resides in its substratum is demonstrated from the fact that it has distinguishable parts: that is, present time is distinguished from both past and future time. Were these parts not distinguishable, argues Gersonides, then any part of time would equal the whole of time. Hence, time must reside in that which it measures. At the same time, it is separable from any substratum; for if it were in its substratum, there would be as many times as there are substrata. But we know that there is only one time and not a multiplicity of times. Hence time must not reside in its substratum (*ibid.*: 329–30). According to Gersonides, time is partly potential and partly actual. Gersonides now demonstrates that time must have been generated. We have seen that time is contained in the category of quantity. Gersonides will argue that just as quantity is finite, so too is time.

But Gersonides' rejection of Aristotle's eternity thesis, and his support of creation, do not commit Gersonides to a theory of creation *ex nihilo*. Arguing that creation out of nothing is incompatible with the facts of physical reality, Gersonides adopts a version of the second view, adopting a Platonic model of matter drawn ultimately from the *Timaeus*. Gersonides interprets the opening of Genesis to refer to two types of matter. *Geshem* is the primordial matter out

of which the universe was created; not capable of motion or rest, it was characterized by negation and was inert and chaotic. This matter is identified with the primeval waters described in Genesis. *Homer* is prime matter, in the Aristotelian sense of a substratum always aligned with form. It contains within itself the potentiality to receive forms but is not an ontologically independent entity. Gersonides compares this matter to darkness: just as darkness is the absence of light, this matter represents the absence of form or shape. On this basis Gersonides argues that the world was created out of an eternally pre-existent matter (*ibid.*: 372). Gersonides' theory of creation, with its emphasis on the ontology of matter, thus reinforces his theodicy.

### CONCLUSION

Gersonides' philosophical ideas went against the grain of traditional Jewish thought. Whereas his commentaries occupied a central place in Jewish theology, his philosophical work was rejected, or roundly criticized. Jewish philosophers such as Hasdai Crescas and Isaac Abrabanel, for example, felt obliged to subject his works to lengthy criticism. Only in recent years has Gersonides received his rightful place in the history of philosophy. As scholars have rediscovered his thought and have made his corpus available to a modern audience, Gersonides has finally been appreciated as an insightful, ruthlessly consistent philosopher, committed to logical argument even when it forces a reconceptualization of Jewish belief.

### FURTHER READING

- Feldman, S. 1978. "Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect". *American Jewish Society Review* 3: 99–120.
- Feldman, S. 1997. "Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides)". In *History of Jewish Philosophy*, D. Frank & O. Leaman (eds), 379–98. London: Routledge.
- Freudenthal, G. (ed.) 1992. *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*. Leiden: Brill.
- Goldstein, B. & D. Pingree 1990. *Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication for the Conjunction of 1345*. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 80(6). Philadelphia, PA: APS.
- Kellner, M. 1979. "R. Levi Ben Gerson: A Bibliographical Essay". *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 12: 13–23.
- Manekin, C. 2003. "Conservative Tendencies in Gersonides' Religious Philosophy". In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, D. Frank & O. Leaman (eds), 304–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, A. 1926. "The Correspondence Between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology". *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3: 311–58.
- Nadler, S. 2001. "Gersonides on Providence: A Jewish Chapter in the History of the General Will". *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62: 37–57.

- Rudavsky, T. 1988. "Creation, Time and Infinity in Gersonides". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26: 25–44.
- Shatzmiller, J. 1972. "Gersonides and the Community of Orange in the Middle Ages". *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 2: 111–26 [Hebrew].
- Touati, C. 1973. *La Pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.

On COSMOLOGY see also Chs 4, 10; Vol. 1, Chs 6, 8, 14, 17. On EVIL/PROBLEM OF EVIL see also Vol. 1, Chs 18, 19; Vol. 3, Chs 13, 18, 19; Vol. 4, Chs 12, 18; Vol. 5, Chs 19, 22, 23. On FAITH see also Chs 6, 12, 18; Vol. 1, Ch. 13; Vol. 3, Ch. 8; Vol. 4, Chs 8, 10, 13; Vol. 5, Chs 7, 18. On IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL see also Ch. 12; Vol. 1, Chs 2, 4; Vol. 3, Chs 10, 19. On PREDICATION see also Chs 11, 13; Vol. 5, Ch. 18. On PROVIDENCE see also Vol. 3, Ch. 15. On REASON see also Chs 10, 11, 12, 18; Vol. 3, Chs 8, 12, 16, 21; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 8.

This page intentionally left blank