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Introduction

Levi ben Gershom (1288–1344)—also known as Ralbag¹ or Gersonides²—is regarded as one of the intellectual giants of the medieval Jewish world. What is perhaps most impressive about Gersonides is the number of disciplines at which he excelled. In academic circles, Gersonides is known primarily as a philosopher whose stature in the Middle Ages was second only to that of his great predecessor, Maimonides. His philosophical works include an original treatise, *The Wars of the Lord*, and a number of super-commentaries on Averroes' expositions of Aristotle.

Philosophy, however, was only one of many pursuits. In the medieval Jewish community, Gersonides was perhaps best known as a biblical commentator. He authored an extensive body of exegetical writings, many of which are still printed in standard rabbinic Bibles (*Mikra'ot Gedolot*). Indicative of his popularity as an exegete is that his *Commentary on Job* was one of the very first Hebrew books to be printed. We also have evidence that Gersonides was a talmudic authority of some stature, an expertise that is evident in his discussion of halakhic issues in his *Commentary on the Torah*. Gersonides was also a renowned astronomer and mathematician. It was in these areas that he exerted his greatest impact outside the Jewish community. A number of his astronomical and mathematical works were translated into Latin.³

Gersonides was in many ways the best representative of the culture in which he lived. He spent his entire life in Provence, an area that in his period witnessed a remarkable flowering of Jewish intellectual life. Provence was located at the crossroads between Jewish communities in France to the north which excelled in talmudic learning, and Jewish communities in Spain to the south which were renowned for their accomplishments in phi-

osophy, mysticism, and poetry. The intersection of these two worlds in Provence allowed this region to produce one of the most vibrant Jewish cultures of the Middle Ages.⁴

Soon after his death, Gersonides became a controversial figure. The views expressed in his philosophical work, *The Wars of the Lord*, and in his biblical commentaries tended towards the unorthodox and thus aroused the ire of the more traditional elements of the Jewish community. As a more conservative strain in Jewish thought began to develop in the century after him, Gersonides' writings were attacked. Prominent Jewish thinkers such as Crescas, Arama, and Abravanel severely criticized his views. These attacks would dampen interest in Gersonides' writings among Jewish thinkers until the modern period. It is only in contemporary academic circles that Gersonides has again been fully revived as a subject of study.⁵

The present project is a study of Gersonides' views on the concept of the Chosen People. There is perhaps little need to justify the value of exploring this issue. If Gersonides is regarded as one of Judaism's greatest philosophers, the concept of Jewish chosenness has consistently been one of its principle doctrines. We therefore have as the subject of our study both a philosopher and a theme that are of central importance in the history of Jewish thought.

Yet, there are several reasons that an analysis of the issue of Jewish chosenness is of particular importance in the study of Gersonides. The first has to do with the nature of his philosophical system. Gersonides grapples with the same tension between the world views of Aristotle and the Bible that had characterized the philosophy of Maimonides and would continue to be a focus of concern for Jewish philosophers until the end of the Middle Ages. But unlike most other Jewish philosophers in his period, Gersonides was willing to adopt key elements of Aristotelian metaphysics that were in conflict with the thought-world of the Bible and its rabbinic interpreters. The central feature of Gersonides' philosophical system is a highly Aristotelian conception of God—one that betrays the strong influence of Averroes. Like Aristotle's First Mover, Gersonides' God is an impersonal Being. He is a Deity who has limited knowledge of events in the world below, is unable to experience a change in will and cannot interact directly with human affairs.

The challenge which therefore characterizes much of Gersonides' philosophy is in interpreting the central doctrines of the Bible so that they conform to this conception of an impersonal God. With great creativity and ingenuity, Gersonides recasts all the major biblical categories—such as creation, prophecy, providence, and miracles—in order to bring them into line with his philosophical principles.

It should be clear why a study of Gersonides' views on Jewish chosenness is important for an understanding of his philosophical thought as a whole. It is with the concept of the Chosen People, as much as with any other major doctrine in Judaism, that the conflict between Gersonides' Aristotelianism and his loyalty to the tenets of classical Judaism is most evident. How can the Jewish people have a special covenantal relationship with God if God is an impersonal Being? How can there be a Chosen People if God does not directly interact with human affairs? The coherence of Gersonides' synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and traditional Jewish doctrine is therefore very much dependent upon how well he handles the issue of Jewish election.

We may also mention here that if Gersonides' Aristotelianism posed a challenge to the notion that the Jewish people had special standing in God's eyes, the Christian environment in which he lived would only heighten that challenge, albeit in a very different vein. How acquainted Gersonides was with Christian theology and philosophy is not easy to determine. Gersonides' contacts with Christian clerics appear to have been prompted primarily by his expertise in astronomy.⁶ Nevertheless, he surely must have been aware—as Jewish thinkers in Christian Europe generally were—that one of the central doctrines of the Church was the repudiation of Jewish chosenness.

Another reason that a study of Gersonides' views on the concept of the Chosen People is important is that it provides an opportunity to explore a much neglected portion of his writings: his biblical commentaries. Specialists in Gersonides' philosophical thought have tended to focus their energies almost exclusively on his major philosophical work, *The Wars of the Lord*, a work that explores six topics: the immortality of the intellect, prophecy, divine knowledge, providence, cosmology, and creation. It is characterized by detailed and systematic philosophical argumentation in which Gersonides carefully weighs the views of his predecessors before deciding on his own position. At the end of each section, Gersonides also demonstrates that his views are in harmony with biblical doctrine.⁷

Far less attention has been paid to Gersonides' exegetical writings. It is difficult to make generalizations about these works, since they exhibit wide variation in content, style, and structure. Yet one feature they have in common is that, to one degree or another, they all draw from the philosophical material in the *Wars*. Some of the commentaries are thoroughly philosophical. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, for instance, Gersonides utilizes his philosophical views in the *Wars* in order to read the Song of Songs as an extended allegory about the intellect. The *Commentary on the Torah*, which is perhaps his most important exegetical work, incorporates a mixture of philosophical material and more purely exegetical ex-

position. Others commentaries, such as those on the historical books in the Prophets, are more exegetical than philosophical. The philosophical element, however, is never entirely absent.

The feature which is perhaps most indicative of the philosophical character of Gersonides' exegetical works is the *to'aliyyot*, or 'lessons,' which appear in most of his commentaries.⁸ In these *to'aliyyot*, Gersonides reviews the major philosophical lessons gleaned from the portion of the biblical text upon which he has just commented. These lessons offer philosophical insights in one of three areas that are described in his introduction to the *Commentary on the Torah*: the commandments, moral and political philosophy, and theoretical philosophy that includes metaphysics and natural science.⁹

Given the wealth of philosophical material in these commentaries, it is surprising that they have received so little attention from scholars of Jewish philosophy. One prominent scholar has questioned whether these writings are of any value at all as a source for Gersonides' philosophical views. In a brief statement in his *Philosophies of Judaism*, Julius Guttman claims that the philosophical positions expressed in the biblical commentaries deviate significantly from those expressed in the *Wars*. Guttman's assessment is that Gersonides altered his philosophical positions in the commentaries in order to appeal to a more traditional audience.¹⁰ Guttman, however, offers no evidence for his far-reaching claim. Moreover, he is the only scholar, to my knowledge, who holds this view.

Charles Touati was the first scholar, at least in recent times, to highlight the significance of the biblical commentaries as sources of insight into Gersonides' philosophical thought. Before the appearance of much of the scholarship on Gersonides in the last few years, Touati had already called attention to the wealth of philosophical material in Gersonides' exegetical writings and urged scholars to take a closer look at this portion of Gersonides' corpus.¹¹ Touati himself followed up on this suggestion in his major work, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide*, the most comprehensive study to date on Gersonides' philosophical thought.¹² In this monumental study, Touati made extensive use of Gersonides' exegetical writings alongside the material in the *Wars* in explicating his philosophy.

But despite Touati's efforts, the scholarship on these works is still very much in a preliminary stage. Touati's work still focuses primarily on the philosophical issues dealt with in Gersonides' *Wars*. Other scholars have produced only a handful of studies on the philosophical material in Gersonides' biblical commentaries.¹³ Thus, there is much that still remains to be explored about the role of Gersonides' exegetical works in the development of his philosophy.

We may also add that it is not just the philosophical material in Gersonides' commentaries that has received inadequate attention. There are,

for instance, no studies on the exegetical method that Gersonides employs in these works. Gersonides' commentaries exhibit a remarkable blend of exegetical styles. He often adopts Maimonides' philosophical method of biblical interpretation, but he is just as much influenced by the French and Spanish tradition of Jewish exegesis which emphasized *peshat*, the plain meaning of Scripture, over *derash*, the homiletical meaning. Gersonides often draws from the great commentators in this tradition—Rashi, ibn Ezra, and Rashbam—even though he often does not cite them by name.¹⁴ Gersonides also makes highly creative use of rabbinic aggadah throughout his commentaries, even though, once again, he does not often cite his sources.¹⁵

Another virtually unexplored area in Gersonides' biblical commentaries is his treatment of halakhah. We find in Gersonides' *Commentary on the Torah* lengthy halakhic discussions whenever he encounters legal sections in the biblical text. In these portions of his commentaries, Gersonides develops and applies a highly original method of interpretation in an attempt to connect the teachings of the oral Torah with those of the written Torah.¹⁶

The present study is designed to offer at least a partial corrective to the imbalance in the scholarship on Gersonides by examining a major philosophical theme that is developed primarily in Gersonides' biblical commentaries. Our analysis of Gersonides' views on Jewish chosenness must certainly begin with an examination of some of the principle doctrines in the *Wars*. Some of the issues discussed in this treatise—such as prophecy, divine knowledge, and providence—are very much relevant to the question of Jewish chosenness. However, the bulk of the material for our study is to be found in the biblical commentaries. For the most part, it is in these writings that Gersonides develops his views on God's providential relationship with the Jewish people and attempts to formulate a philosophy of Jewish history. Most of our effort, therefore, will be devoted to this section of his corpus.

Our study will also attempt to make a more general assessment of the relationship between the philosophical material in the *Wars* and that which is found in the biblical commentaries. If the commentaries do indeed contain philosophical insights not found in the *Wars*, as we will argue, we must then ask the following questions: Why would Gersonides choose to divide his philosophical views between two very different genres of literature? Why would he insist on expressing some philosophical views in the *Wars*, and others in his exegetical writings? The significance of these questions is underscored if one notes that Gersonides is the only major medieval Jewish philosopher, aside from Saadia, who produces both a major philosophical work *and* a body of biblical commentaries.

This is one issue that Touati does not address in his major study. Throughout his book, Touati brings together the philosophical material in

the *Wars* and the commentaries as if it is all extracted from one large work. No attempt is made to evaluate the distinctive contributions of these respective portions of Gersonides' corpus to the development of his philosophical thought.

One possible approach is to argue that the *Wars* and the biblical commentaries simply represent different stages in Gersonides' intellectual development. Since the commentaries were written, for the most part, at a later stage of Gersonides' career than the *Wars*,¹⁷ he was bound to come up with new philosophical insights in the course of composing his exegetical writings that are not represented in his earlier work. While there is certainly some truth in this assessment, there may be more to the differences between the *Wars* and the biblical commentaries than the chronology of composition. What needs to be investigated is whether Gersonides consciously chose to deal with some issues in the commentaries rather than in the *Wars*, and if so, why.

We must, of course, recognize our limitations here. A comprehensive evaluation of the relationship between the philosophical material in the *Wars* and that found in the biblical commentaries is well beyond the scope of our project. The present study deals with only one issue in Gersonides' thought that straddles the boundary between philosophy and biblical commentary. There are certainly many other such topics. Still, by focusing on an issue as important as the concept of the Chosen People, we will get some insight into how philosophical material is apportioned by Gersonides between his philosophical and exegetical writings.¹⁸

There is one other limitation that we will have to impose upon our study. In the course of our discussion, we will be dealing with some of the non-philosophical aspects of Gersonides' commentaries. An analysis of any philosophical theme in these writings inevitably forces us to confront such issues as Gersonides' exegetical method and his use of rabbinic agadah. However, it is important to emphasize that our focus will be on the philosophical material in Gersonides' commentaries and that we will not be able to explore these other issues in any detail. It is not that the latter are unimportant or uninteresting; on the contrary, they are of sufficient significance and complexity that they are best left for separate study.

To summarize, the purpose of our project is twofold. First, an analysis of Gersonides' views on the concept of the Chosen People will provide important insight into his philosophical thought. It will enable us to see how Gersonides interprets a doctrine that is both central to Judaism and at the same time is a formidable challenge to his Aristotelian principles. Second, our study will allow for a careful examination of the much neglected philosophical material in Gersonides' biblical commentaries. We hope to highlight the value of these writings as sources of insight into Gersonides'

philosophical system and to provide a better understanding of the relationship between these works and his major philosophical treatise, *The Wars of the Lord*.

We begin our study in chapter two with a survey of the philosophical material in the *Wars* that is relevant for our project. Of interest to us will be Gersonides' views on divine providence, an issue that is dealt with in a number of places in the *Wars*. We will demonstrate that while the *Wars* provides essential philosophical concepts for an understanding of Jewish chosenness, it does not offer a philosophical framework to account for the ongoing relationship between God and the Jewish people throughout history. The key element that is missing in the *Wars* is a philosophical interpretation of the covenant idea, perhaps the central concept for any interpretation of Jewish chosenness.

The rest of our study will focus on Gersonides' biblical commentaries and show that it is only in these writings that Gersonides fully develops an interpretation of the covenant idea. We will proceed in a historical manner by tracing Gersonides' interpretation of the covenant concept in each of the major phases of Jewish history, from the time of Abraham onward. The main thread running through our entire analysis will be the centrality of the Patriarchal covenant in Gersonides' reading of history. We will show that Gersonides equates this covenant with a special form of providence that is inherited from one generation to the next, and that it is this expression of providence which, in turn, accounts for the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Chapters three and four will discuss Gersonides' philosophical interpretation of the Patriarchal covenant and its role up to the conquest of Canaan. In chapter three, we will examine Gersonides' exegesis of Genesis 15, in which the Patriarchal covenant is first formulated. It is here that Gersonides first identifies the Patriarchal covenant with an inheritable form of providence. In chapter four, we will see how Gersonides utilizes his understanding of the Patriarchal covenant to explain events in the rest of the Pentateuch, and, in the process, refines his philosophical views about the nature and function of the covenant.

Chapters five and six will focus on Gersonides' philosophical understanding of the Sinaitic covenant. In chapter five, we will discuss the two major issues that are essential in Gersonides' understanding of this covenant: the ascendancy of Mosaic prophecy and the role of the Torah as a guidebook for philosophical perfection. Chapter six will assess Gersonides' views on esoteric discourse and whether he in any way supports Maimonides' esoteric method of reading Scripture. This latter subject is important both for an understanding of Gersonides' views regarding the role of the Torah as philosophical guidebook and also for gaining insight

into Gersonides' attitude towards his own philosophical writing. In these chapters, the centrality of the Patriarchal covenant in Gersonides' thinking will continue to be evident. We will see that Gersonides understands the covenant at Sinai as an outgrowth of the Patriarchal covenant.

In chapters seven and eight, we will look at Gersonides' philosophical views on Jewish history from the time of the conquest to the messianic period. Most of our analysis in these chapters will concentrate on the Patriarchal covenant which, according to Gersonides, continues to play a central role in God's relationship with the Jewish people up to the end of history.

Chapter nine will shift from the content of Gersonides' philosophical views regarding the Jewish people to the style in which these views are expressed. We will attempt to explain Gersonides' tendency in the biblical commentaries to describe God's providential activity in terms that seem more appropriate for a personal God than the Aristotelian God depicted in the *Wars*. This issue is important not only for evaluating Gersonides' views on Jewish chosenness, but also for assessing the character of the biblical commentaries as a whole. Chapter ten is our concluding chapter in which we will make final assessments of the issues that have prompted our study.

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

The Hebrew text of *The Wars of the Lord* (*Milhamot ha-Shem*) that was used for our study was the Leipzig edition of 1866 (*MH*). Despite numerous errors, this text is the best Hebrew edition available.

Seymour Feldman has undertaken the ambitious project of translating the entire treatise into English. So far, two volumes have been completed (*WL 1* and *WL 2*), which cover the first four of the six books in the *Wars*. For English translations of passages in books one through four, we have cited Feldman's translation. This translation has the advantage not only of providing a faithful rendering of a difficult text, but also of affording us corrected readings in the Hebrew, since Feldman consulted three manuscripts that correct the errors in the Leipzig edition. In some instances, I have deviated from Feldman's translation. In such cases, I have indicated that I have made some adjustments to his reading of the text.

Feldman has not yet translated books five and six of the *Wars*. Translations of passages from these books are therefore my own. Professor Feldman has been kind enough to offer his assistance by reviewing my translations of these texts, and, where necessary, correcting them in light of the manuscript material in his possession.

Gersonides' biblical commentaries present more of a problem. All of the commentaries have been published. However, due to the general neglect of these writings, none has ever been published in a critical edition,

nor have any been translated into a Western language.¹⁹ For the Hebrew texts of the commentaries, we have therefore relied, as have other scholars, on standard published editions. The specific editions used in this study are identified in my bibliography, along with the forms of citation that appear in my notes. All translations from the commentaries are my own.²⁰

The exception was our treatment of Gersonides' *Commentary on the Torah*, his largest and perhaps most complex commentary. Of Gersonides' exegetical works, this commentary was the most important one for this study, since it yielded many of Gersonides' central positions and insights regarding our topic. In this case, therefore, we looked beyond the printed editions in order to ascertain the most reliable readings of the text.

The resources that were used to ensure accurate readings of this commentary will require some explanation. The *Commentary on the Torah* has been printed several times: in Mantua (before 1480), Venice (1547), and Amsterdam (1724). Scholars have generally relied on the 1547 Venice edition, which has been reprinted in New York (1958) and Jerusalem (1967). The problems with this edition are evident; even with a superficial reading of the text, one finds a multitude of errors.

A group of Israeli rabbinic scholars at Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Ma'aleh Adumim have begun working on a critical edition of the *Commentary on the Torah*. Their preliminary research on the manuscripts has brought additional problems to light regarding the reliability of the printed editions. They have found evidence that a substantial amount of material from the original commentary was not included in the Venice edition.

I have been in touch with Eli Freiman, one of the principal scholars in this group, who has been kind enough to share his work with me.²¹ Freiman and his colleagues have discovered thirty-five extant manuscripts of the *Commentary on the Torah*, which can be divided into two distinct families. The manuscripts in one of these families contain substantially more material than those in the other family. The problem with the printed editions of Mantua and Venice is that they are based on the family of manuscripts with incomplete texts. Freiman's group believes that the longer version is, in fact, the more authentic of the two. They therefore intend to publish their critical edition on the basis of the more complete family of texts.²²

This edition has not yet appeared in print.²³ However, Freiman has shared important information with me, that has given me access to a more accurate reading of the commentary than that of the printed editions. First, Freiman has identified for me the manuscript upon which his group is basing its critical edition: Or. 42 from the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, in Florence, Italy. I was able to obtain a microfilm of this text through the Institute for Hebrew Manuscripts of the National Library, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In the course of his research, Freiman has also come across an interesting phenomenon that is highly relevant to our concerns. It would appear that the discrepancies between the Venice edition and the more complete version of the text did not go unnoticed by earlier scholars. Freiman has located several old copies of the Venice text that contain handwritten corrections based on the more complete family of manuscripts. These corrections are most often written into the margins. In some copies whole pages of lengthy handwritten passages have been inserted into the binding.

Freiman discovered one remarkable edition of this kind which was originally from the Etz Hayyim Library of Amsterdam and is now in the National Library at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. According to Freiman, the corrections and additions in this text appear to have been based on a large number of manuscripts. This corrected edition provides, in his estimation, a highly accurate reading of the commentary. I was also able to obtain a microfilm of this text from the National Library.²⁴

These two texts, the Florence manuscript (*F*), and the emended Venice text from the Etz Hayyim Library (*EVE*), were used throughout this study to ensure accurate readings of the *Commentary on the Torah*. Discrepancies between these texts were settled in favor of the emended Venice edition, which, in the absence of a critical edition, is perhaps the next best thing. However, on some occasions, the reading in the Florence manuscript was adopted when it was clear that it presented a far superior rendering of the text.

In the course of this study, I discovered that while this manuscript material was helpful, its impact on the project was actually rather minimal. Most of the material that appears in the more complete version of the commentary, but which was wholly excluded from the Venice text, was not relevant to our concerns. This material deals mainly with philosophical explanations of the biblical commandments or technical halakhic issues. The Florence manuscript and the emended Venice edition were helpful mostly for correcting small errors in the printed edition of the commentary. Only in rare instances did these corrections make an important difference in the reading of a passage.

We should mention that an edition of Gersonides' *Commentary on the Torah* is also in the process of being published under the auspices of Mossad ha-Rav Kook in Jerusalem. The first volume that includes the commentary on Genesis appeared recently.²⁵ However, it is not a critical edition. The editor made use of the Venice printing and a limited body of manuscript material in the private library of Mossad ha-Rav Kook.²⁶ Our preference in this study was therefore to rely on the resources suggested by Freiman and his group.

One final note on translations of biblical passages. All English translations of biblical quotations are from the new edition of the Jewish Publication Society (NJPS). I will, however, deviate occasionally from this translation when it differs significantly from Gersonides' own understanding of the biblical text.