INTRODUCTION

“WITHOUT ANY DOUBT”:
GERSONIDES ON METHOD AND KNOWLEDGE

Gersonides—Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (Provence, 1288–1344)—was a multifaceted and fascinating thinker, a unique figure among Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. He devoted his entire career to philosophy and science and was well-versed in every branch of the science of his time. The scope of his oeuvre reveals him to have been perhaps the most prolific polymath of all medieval Jewish philosophers. He wrote supercommentaries on many of Averroes’s commentaries on Aristotle, but was also an original thinker in his own right; in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Wars of the Lord*, he conducted an independent inquiry into philosophical problems and philosophical-theological questions that had not been fully resolved (to his mind) before his day. He was also an exegete who wrote an essentially philosophical commentary on almost all of the books of the Bible, as well as a halakhist who devised an interesting and original plan (never carried out) for legal codes in which he would employ logical inference to derive the law from the biblical text. Gersonides did not shut himself up in his study, reading and writing and conducting theoretical deliberations about scientific questions, on the basis of the philosophical and scientific texts he knew. Instead, he was an experimental scientist, an empiricist—a rare phenomenon in the Middle Ages. He spent many years observing the stars; drawing on his documentation of these observations he prepared new astronomical tables and elaborated his own astronomical theory. To make his stellar observations more precise he invented a new instrument, the Jacob’s staff, and improved other astronomical devices that helped him determine the position of the stars in the sky and measure their diameters. As a result he is considered to be one of the most important and original astronomers of the Middle Ages, among Jews and Christians alike.

Gersonides’ singularity lies in the way in which he viewed the several facets of his scholarly work as a unified whole, with all parts interrelated, complementing and illuminating one another. There is an obvious link between his practical astronomy—his celestial observations, the instruments he invented or improved, and the new astronomical tables he composed—and his new astronomical theory; but there is
also a strong link among his supercommentaries on Averroes on Aristotle, his own masterpiece the *Wars of the Lord*, and his Bible commentaries. His writings contain frequent cross-references from one work to another, noting parallel discussions of the same topics elsewhere in that corpus and advising readers to supplement the present discussion with what he had already expounded at greater length elsewhere. There is an impressive unity to this enterprise.

The image that emerges from the corpus of his writings is of a person with an original and critical mind who did not accept the authority of his predecessors, philosophers and scientists, but investigated every matter for himself. He made an original contribution in every area to which he turned, in philosophy, in biblical exegesis, and in the sciences.

As I engaged myself with Gersonides’ thought, one of the things that stood out most boldly was his extraordinary attention to methods of inquiry and composition, in his own works and in his reading of certain biblical books. The present volume collects eight articles on Gersonides’ thought and method, published between 1989 and 2007. Two of them were written in English, but have been revised for the present volume; the others have Hebrew or French originals and the translation-revision here represents their first English publication. The original publications were as follows:

- “Gersonide commentateur d’Averroès,” ibid., pp. 59–90.