Gersonides’ Commentary on the Book of Job

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It is surprising that in the modern academic study of medieval Jewish philosophy, virtually no attention has been paid to the Commentary on the Book of Job of R. Levi ben Gershom (1288–1344), the celebrated medieval Provençal figure better known in contemporary scholarship as Gersonides. To my knowledge, there is no single article that has ever been written on this work, let alone a more lengthy study. One finds some discussion of the commentary in treatments of the related issue of providence in Gersonides’ thought, but such discussion is usually superficial and tends not to go much beyond what Gersonides says about Job in his major philosophical work, The Wars of the Lord.1

1 Gersonides’ Commentary on the Book of Job was completed in 1325. It was first printed in Ferrara in 1477. It has been printed numerous times thereafter, and now appears in all standard rabbinic Bibles (Mikra’ot Gedolot). All citations in this paper will be from the Mikra’ot Gedolot. The first four chapters of the commentary were translated into Latin by a Jewish convert to Christianity, Louis-Henri D’Aquin (Paris, 1623). Chapters six and seven were translated into Latin as part of a thesis by Christophore Altenberger, RaLBaG h.e. Rabbi Levi ben Gersom, Commentarius Rabbinicus in cap. VI et VII HIOBI cum versione latina et annotationibus (Leipzig, 1703). The Book of Job was put into poetic verse in accordance with Gersonides’ commentary in 1364 by Zark Berfet, an Aragonese figure, and was published as Perush‘Iyyov be-Ki‘ur Maflag (Venice, 1544; Cracow, 1574). An English translation was produced by Abraham Lassen, The Commentary of Levi ben Gershon on the Book of Job (New York: Bloch, 1946). However, all English translations of the commentary in this paper will be my own.

2 The original Hebrew text of Gersonides’ Wars of the Lord, Milhamot Ha-Slem, was published in two printings (Riva di Trento, 1560; Leipzig: C. B. Lorck,
One would have expected otherwise. As a medieval Jewish philosopher, Gersonides' reputation is perhaps second only to that of Maimonides. His biblical commentaries achieved wide circulation in the medieval Jewish community. He was also a renowned astronomer and mathematician. Moreover, the *Commentary on the Book of Job* in particular was widely read by Jews in the medieval period, its popularity reflected in the fact that it was one of the very first Hebrew translations of a biblical text. The work has been translated into English, with some sections having been translated more than once by different authors. However, the most authoritative translation and the only one that covers the entire treatise is that of Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984–99), 3 vols. Citations in this paper will be from the Leipzig edition and the Feldman translation.
