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Review of Gad Freudenthal (Ed.), *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*

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Review of Gad Freudenthal (Ed.), *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*

Abstract

As is well known, anniversaries of the birth or death of important figures of the past often provide rich occasions for new and comprehensive scholarly assessments. The 700th anniversary of the birth of Gersonides (R. Levi ben Gershom [1288-1344]) was just such an occasion. Two international conferences devoted to the life and times of this Jewish philosopher, astronomer, and biblical exegete, held in France in 1988, produced two fine anthologies of original and useful essays by scholars already known for their work on Gersonides and by several others in related fields. The first, edited by Gilbert Dahan, is entitled *Gersonide en son temps* (peeters, 1991); the second is the volume under review.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies

written during the reign of Charlemagne in every detail and facilitating their research considerably. Stoll has made a major contribution to the study of early medieval, pre-Salernitan medicine.

FRANCIS B. BRÉVART

Gad Freudenthal (Editor). *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*. (Collection de Travaux de l'Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences, 36.) xxii + 422 pp., figs., table, app., bibls., index. Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1992. Dfl 168, \$96.

As is well known, anniversaries of the birth or death of important figures of the past often provide rich occasions for new and comprehensive scholarly assessments. The 700th anniversary of the birth of Gersonides (R. Levi ben Gershom [1288–1344]) was just such an occasion. Two international conferences devoted to the life and times of this Jewish philosopher, astronomer, and biblical exegete, held in France in 1988, produced two fine anthologies of original and useful essays by scholars already known for their work on Gersonides and by several others in related fields. The first, edited by Gilbert Dahan, is entitled *Gersonide en son temps* (Peeters, 1991); the second is the volume under review.

Studies on Gersonides focuses more on the scientific achievements of this versatile intellectual and thus should be of greater interest to the readers of *ISIS*, although both volumes are important and they complement each other nicely. Gad Freudenthal divides his collection into four sections: Gersonides' astronomy, his work in mathematics, the relation of his scientific work to his philosophy and theology, and two biobibliographical essays. The essays are generally of high quality and offer several new insights for the study of Gersonides' scientific project. The only perspective relatively lacking is that of the "external history" of Gersonides' science, the social context of his intellectual world within both the Jewish and Christian cultures of Orange and Avignon. (Several essays in the Dahan volume partially address this subject.) Given my limited space, I will comment briefly on only a small number of some of the best essays in the Freudenthal collection.

Bernard Goldstein has contributed more than

any other scholar to the study of Gersonides as a scientist, and he appears to have been a guiding force in conceiving this collaborative effort as well. The volume begins with his useful synthesis of many of his earlier writings, emphasizing Gersonides' originality as a thinker and inventor, along with his bold commitment to observation in challenging the views of the ancients. José Luis Mancha's study of the Latin translations of Gersonides' astronomy offers new information on the possible collaboration of Gersonides with his translator, the hermit friar Petrus of Alexandria, revealing the possibilities of creative dialogue between Jews and Christians in fourteenth-century Provence. Tony Lévy provides an annotated French translation of two mathematical works of Gersonides. Herbert Davidson lucidly discusses Gersonides' understanding of the material and active intellects within the context of earlier discussions of these critical notions in medieval philosophy. Y. Tzvi Langermann's treatment of Gersonides' views on magnetism and solar heat explains quite effectively the interrelationship of Gersonides' philosophical, astrological, and theological concerns. Gad Freudenthal makes the connection between Gersonides' science and theology even more understandable in his important essay on the thinker's soteriology, epistemology, and astronomy. By elucidating Gersonides' religious need to understand the heavens, Freudenthal enables his scientific "realism" and his commitment to scientific progress to be more easily grasped.

The volume, well edited and handsomely produced, concludes with a most comprehensive and usable bibliography of works by and on Gersonides by Menachem Kellner, offering an indispensable guide for all future research on medieval Jewish civilization and its most original scientific thinker.

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

Helmut Birkhan. *Die alchemistische Lehrdichtung des Gratheus filius philosophi in Cod. Vind. 2372: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur okkulten Wissenschaft im Spätmittelalter*. (Oesterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 591.) (Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Altgermanistik.) Volume 1: *Einleitung—Untersuchungen—Kommentar*. 494 pp., bibl. Volume 2: *Textedition—Uebersetz-*