

GERSONIDES ON DREAMS, DIVINATION,
AND ASTROLOGY
DANIEL J. LASKER

Consider the following stories:

"We have heard that a man was sick for a long time. He saw a snake enter a pot, and he had an overwhelming desire to eat the food [in the pot]. He asked his maidservant for it, but when she approached the pot and saw the snake, she said: 'Woe, there is death in the pot', and she would not give it to him under any circumstances. So, the man crawled on his hands and knees up to the pot, took the food, and ate it. The food pushed the poisonous humor which had made him sick into one part of his body; as a result, he made a complete recovery."

"A Woman, who had a fistula on her thigh, was in a garden and saw an herb which she did not recognize. She had a great desire to put this herb on her fistula, and thus she did. It was not long before she became healed. Now, a wise woman had been there, and she saw this matter and deduced therefrom that this herb can cure fistulas. She used it to cure many people, as we ourselves saw. She did not want to reveal this [cure] to anyone, and, hence, the secret went to the grave with her."

"I had a veridical dream in which I saw a man standing near me in the street in order to hurt me. I had never seen this man previously, but an impression of his likeness stayed in my imagination. The next day, I saw the man whom I had seen in my dream. I knew it was the man whom I had seen in my dream because of his likeness, his dress, and the other details I had seen in the dream. I was afraid of him, so I held back from walking on my way. Thus, I was saved from him, as I had seen in my dream."

"Once I imagined that one of my brothers was falling from a table which was in another room. I did not know previously that the small boy was on the table. I woke up from this imagining, ran to the other room, and found that he had already fallen. Another time, while I was walking I imagined that a man was hitting my neck with a sword but was not hurting me at all. This was immediately verified."

"A female diviner once told a man that if he were to go a particular way, he would be killed. He did not believe her, and he was killed in that land."

"The astrologers inform us of the thoughts and actions of men and they are often correct. Now, it is true that they are also often wrong, but that is because of the natural difficulties of verification of this profession because we are very far away from these divine bodies, both in essence and in place, and because of the difficulty that our senses do not perceive what these heavenly bodies necessitate in each instance."

These stories mark their teller as someone who accepts unquestioningly the veracity of astrology and folktales and who has a strong belief in his own parapsychological abilities. Certainly to the modern reader, and even to some medievals, a believer in such accounts would be seen at best as quite gullible or impressionable. Thus, it appears at first incongruous that this material finds a prominent place in the works of someone who otherwise comes across as a thoroughgoing rationalist, someone described as perhaps "the truest disciple of Aristotle whom medieval Jewish philosophy produced." Nevertheless, the stories I have recounted are selected from the works of such a man, Gersonides, the fourteenth century Jewish philosopher.

What makes Gersonides' apparent credulity even more remarkable are the beliefs which he is not willing to allow: for example creation ex nihilo, miracles that affect the heavenly bodies, God's knowledge of particulars, and direct divine providence over the affairs of men. A supposedly omnipotent God cannot make the sun stand still (despite what looks like incontrovertible textual evidence from the book of Joshua); an astrologer, on the other hand, can understand the implications of each heavenly movement. A supposedly omniscient God does not know individuals qua individuals (again, despite what the Bible seems to say explicitly); a diviner, however, can know that a particular journey is dangerous for a particular man. Gersonides is unwilling to accept many Biblical accounts at face value; he is, nevertheless, a willing believer in current tales of marvelous events.

In evaluating these apparent paradoxes, I will not discuss here the literary background of Gersonides' theories about dreams and divination. Prof. Altmann has recently shown the chain of tradition which led from Aristotle's De Divinatione per Somnum and De Insomniis, through the apparently pseudepigraphical Arabic paraphrase of these treatises and Averroes' Epitome of them, to the works of Gersonides. Rather, I would like to concentrate on two factors, one external, one internal, which, to my mind, affected Gersonides' views of dreams, divination, and astrology. The external factor is the contemporary

Christian and Jewish emphasis on exempla, stories which often stressed the supernatural; the internal factor is Gersonides' need to believe in the validity of astrology and other extra-sensory phenomena so as to maintain his conception of a God who does not interfere in the affairs of mankind.

The word exemplum usually refers to a narrative story, used either as an example or an illustration of a moral or religious lesson. Though the use of such exempla is well-known in every period, the exemplum as a literary type flourished in Western Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is during this period that such writers as Jacques de Vitry, Etienne de Bourbon, Caesarius of Heisterbach, and the editors of El libro de los Exemplos and Gesta Romanorum collected and disseminated story after story. The use of such exempla by preaching friars was a widespread practice. Exempla are also found in the works of Jewish authors, of which the thirteenth century Sefer Hassidim is the outstanding example. Some exempla were taken from the lives of the saints, others from current historical events. Many of these stories would seem today to be fantastic, but, in their own day, their success was based upon the assumption of credibility.

Given the background of extensive exempla-telling among Gersonides' contemporaries, it is not surprising that he, too, gives such stories credence and even contributes to the literature with his own experiences. One such exemplum even occupies half of a chapter in Milhamot Ha-Shem, i.e., the story of a boy wonder. Gersonides tells us that in his own time there was a boy who could answer whatever he was asked, but he knew nothing else. Gersonides rejects the possibility that this boy was a prophet, since prophecy requires preparation. In light of the fact that the boy was only six or seven when his career began, it is impossible that he had the pre-requisites. (Gersonides introduces the boy's age with the assertion that this fact was truly told [suppar be-'emet], whereas the other exempla are usually presented merely as having been told [suppar]. Similarly, the boy could not have been the dreamer of veridical dreams because 1) veridical dreams come only occasionally and his ability was constant, and 2) veridical dreams do not come as a result of questions addressed to the person while he is awake. Thus, Gersonides concludes, the boy was a diviner, if only an imperfect one, and time would tell why the divination was not complete.

It has been suggested that the Wunderkind mentioned by Gersonides is to be identified with the Prophet of Avila whose activities were described by Gersonides' elder contemporary Solomon ben Adret. It seems to me, however, that such an identification is not probable in light of the details provided by Rashba, in his responsum on the

subject, as compared with Gersonides' account. Even if Rashba's discussion of this prophet is not of benefit in identifying Gersonides' Wunderkind, it does provide an interesting comparison between these two thinkers. In his responsum, Rashba mentions a number of other unusual cases, i.e., he also resorts to exempla-telling. These stories, he asserts, were told to him by reliable witnesses. Thus, there was an illiterate child who could recite Psalms and prescribe medicines. Another incident revolved around an Abraham of Cologne who could interpret the voice of Elijah the Prophet which answered questions from the Holy Ark in the synagogue. Rashba was not such what to make of all these stories, suggesting that each case needed investigation by both sages and men of science (hakhamim ve-'anshei madda^C).

We see here a reversal of the roles traditionally assigned to Gersonides and Rashba. The former, the thoroughgoing rationalist, accepts exempla unquestioningly; the latter, the opponent of Greek wisdom, is skeptical and mandates a (scientific?) investigation of the issue. Rashba's skepticism concerning these stories is not, of course, the result of philosophical analysis but is based on more traditional considerations. Still, he does cite a number of unusual events, reinforcing the contention that the phenomenon of exempla-telling was widespread in Gersonides' time. Thus, when Gersonides argues strongly that experience verified the truth of unusual, supersensory events, as based upon widespread reporting, we can understand the background in which he wrote.

Gersonides could, however, have rejected these exempla as unreliable, or at least have evidenced a healthy bit of skepticism concerning them, as Rashba did. He also did not have to accept astrology without question. It is that most people of the day, both the educated and the masses, believed that the stars determined the fate of men. Some Jewish philosophers, notably Bahya and Maimonides, strongly condemned astrology, yet others, such as Abraham ibn Ezra and Abraham bar Hiyya, both astronomers, were strong believers in astrology. It may be assumed that Gersonides, who was also an accomplished astronomer, saw no reason to challenge the accepted science of the day. Just as in the case of exempla, we could possibly explain Gersonides' acceptance of astrology as a reflection of his environment.

The issue goes deeper, though, in both cases. Gersonides' strict Aristotelianism led him to view God as almost entirely removed from the sublunar scene. God does not interfere directly; reward and punishment are meted out in a purely mechanistic fashion; God's knowledge does not extend to the individual qua individual. The world runs according to natural rules. Still, there are phenomena in the sublunar world which seem to be supernatural: prophecy and other forms of precognition, the

good luck of certain people and the misfortune of others, the occasional miracle, which, because of its Biblical evidence, could not be ignored. Gersonides' Aristotelian God could not be invoked to explain these phenomena. This world is run by the Agent Intellect, but, as a separate intellect, it cannot do the job all by itself. The heavenly bodies are those which determine the fate of the sublunar world, and the Agent Intellect transmits information from the stars to mankind. Thus, all those phenomena which we might otherwise wish to attribute to God and to call supernatural are explained as being perfectly natural, since they are caused by the actions of the Agent Intellect and the heavenly bodies. Furthermore, according to Gersonides, a trained astrologer can discover the rules by which the world is governed. Prophets, diviners, and dreamers can experience precognition. "Miracles" are also explained in as natural a manner as possible. Hence, all unusual occurrences (whether Biblical or contemporary) can be understood as being natural without recourse to a theology of a supernatural, interfering God.

We see, thus, that Gersonides' belief in veridical dreams, divination, and astrology is essential for his philosophical system, for it supports his Aristotelian view of God. Or, put another way, given the fact that God does not intervene directly in the affairs of men, and yet acts which we might be tempted to call supernatural still do occur, an explanation must be sought. Astrology, and related phenomena, provide such a naturalistic answer. In fact, the more such unusual events that can be documented, the more natural they are. Gersonides needs astrology and other natural forms of precognition to justify his theology; given his theology, astrology is the logical consequence. It is, therefore, not surprising that Gersonides rejects such beliefs as creation ex nihilo, personal providence, and miracles affecting heavenly bodies but accepts various forms of prognostication so willingly.

This conclusion is reinforced by a further comparison with Solomon ben Adret. Rashba, as we have seen, is skeptical about claims of special cognition. He also expresses doubts about the validity of dreams and the value of astrology. It may very well be the case that Rashba, who believes in direct divine intervention in the affairs of men, wishes to minimize non-Biblical accounts of supernatural events, specifically because he holds them to be supernatural. If minors or fools were held to be prophets, or at least to have precognition, the status of real prophets would be subject to doubts. Therefore, he is skeptical about the claims of dreamers and diviners. Gersonides, on the other hand, sees in contemporary accounts of precognition a confirmation of his own view of natural prophecy. In this way, the supposed rationalist is prepared to accept as true many fantastic stories; the critic of Greek philosophy is much more circumspect.

In conclusion, we may turn to one other paradox concerning Gersonides' theory of precognition. As we have seen, Gersonides describes a number of dreams in which he saw the future. In addition, he informs us that when he had a difficult philosophical problem, he would fall asleep and try to solve it in his dream. In fact, he even compares his own withdrawal from conscious thought with that of Moses (even though he admits that Moses' contemplation was on a much higher level). Despite his own dream experiences, Gersonides states that most dreamers of veridical dreams are either fools or minors. Their imagination is so strong precisely because their heads are empty of the intelligibles. What, then, is Gersonides' own self-image: a philosopher who attempts to imitate the prophets, or a fool who dreams veridical dreams? Is his parapsychological ability a sign of low intelligence?

The answer should be clear. True, many veridical dreams are dreamt by fools; nevertheless, more intelligent people can have this experience. In fact, the fool will have a strong imagination because his mind is unoccupied by thinking. His veridical dreams will be formed in his imagination. The philosopher, on the other hand, like Gersonides, can, by effort, consciously rid his mind of everything but intelligibles and then be privy to veridical dreams which may solve intellectual problems. The philosopher who can truly isolate his thoughts and clear his mind, as it were, of all extraneous matter can, indeed, aspire to prophecy.

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