



Shlomo Sela. *Abraham Ibn Ezra on Elections, Interrogations, and Medical Astrology.* Leiden: Brill, 2011. xii + 657 pp. \$257.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-21220-6.



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Textbooks for the Medieval Astrologer

Abraham Ibn Ezra (c.1089-c.1161), born in Tudela, spent the first fifty or so years of his life in Muslim Iberia, as far as we know writing Hebrew poetry, both secular and liturgical. Beginning in 1140 and for the next twenty years, Ibn Ezra travelled through Italy, southern France, the Angevin territories, and England, composing biblical commentaries, grammatical and theological works, and scientific treatises. Strikingly, as has long been known but is now becoming clearer, Ibn Ezra in his journeys found himself writing two or more versions of most of his works, in response to requests from students and according to the interests of various patrons.

Shlomo Sela is the world's expert on Ibn Ezra's astrology, having published an analysis of scientific and astrological concepts of space and time in Ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries (1999), a survey of Ibn Ezra's astrological works and particular views on astrology (2003), and numerous articles on his discoveries of previously unknown fragments and versions of Ibn Ezra's astrological treatises.

We know precisely when and where some of these works were written, often from a prefatory poem, introduction, or colophon. And within the texts themselves, Ibn Ezra often referred to his other works, either retrospectively or in allusion to those he planned to write. By coordinating cross-references, it has been possible for scholars to determine—sometimes roughly but often quite exactly—the order and timing of nearly all of Ibn Ezra's scholarly writings. A few years ago, Sela and Gad Freudenthal published a preliminary listing in *Aleph* (2006) of all of Ibn Ezra's non-poetic works.

Sela has now devoted himself to presenting all the astrological writings in a series of critical editions with heavily annotated English translations, published by Brill. The first volume (2007) contained two versions of *The Book of Reasons* (*Sefer ha-Te'amim*). This work consists of explanations for the astrological statements given in *The Beginning of Wisdom* (*Reshit Hokhmah*). *Reshit Hokhmah* I (we have only a fragment from *Reshit Hokhmah* II) is the most well known of Ibn Ezra's three introductions to astrology (the third being *Mishpetei ha-*

Mazzalot), and also the only one of Ibn Ezra's astrological writings to have received a critical edition (Raphael Levy and Francisco Cantera, 1939). The second volume, *The Book of the World* (*Sefer ha-Olam*), extant in two versions, came out in 2010 and treats historical and meteorological astrology.

Now we have the third volume, which contains a total of seven versions of three different texts: *The Book of Elections* (*Sefer ha-Mivharim*), extant in three versions; *The Book of Interrogations* (*Sefer ha-She'elot*), in another three; and *The Book of the Luminaries* (*Sefer ha-Me'orot*), which exists in a single version. The texts deal with three astrological practices: first, elections, choosing the right time to begin some enterprise; second, interrogations, answering clients' questions about their lives; and the interpretation of critical days, determining when crises occur in the course of an illness and what these crises signify when they do occur. Each text-version is treated separately, with a critical Hebrew edition and English translation, and extensive annotations on each translation. Included as well are a number of appendices, most importantly the English-Hebrew glossaries to the individual texts and a Hebrew-English index to the glossaries. As Sela notes, the translation is not meant only for those who do not know Hebrew, but is also a gloss and a commentary on the text. The English text thus includes words and phrases that do not appear in the Hebrew, most marked with brackets.

Sela explains that these three types of astrology belong together because they cast horoscopes not for natural times such as the moment of birth or (used in world astrology) the moment when the sun enters Aries, but for times that are in a sense chosen, either by the astrologer or by the actions/situation of the client. That is to say, in elections the astrologer attempts to find the most favorable time for his client to begin a particular enterprise; in interrogations, he casts a horoscope according to the moment in time when his client asks a question; and in medical astrology, a horoscope cast for the time of the onset of the disease will tell the astrologer the prognosis for the patient.

Still, these texts cannot stand on their own. Like those published in the previous volumes, they form part of what Sela has termed an astrological encyclopedia, namely, a group of seven texts all written between June and November 1148 in Bâziers in an astonishing flurry of activity: *Reshit Hokhmah* I, *Sefer ha-Te'amim* I, *Sefer*

ha-Moladot I (on nativities), *Sefer ha-Me'orot* (a lost version), *Sefer ha-Mivharim* I, *Sefer ha-She'elot* I, and *Sefer ha-Olam* I. (Most were rewritten in Rouen around 1154.)

There were two possible ways of dealing with these texts. The one Sela chose was to publish different versions together, which, in part because some versions are lost to us, makes good sense. It serves to highlight the differences among them. Yet in theory Sela could have published these works in the order in which they were written. One might then have seen the 1148 encyclopedia as a single work of several volumes. Ultimately, when all Sela's volumes are produced, one will have to turn from volume to volume to follow Ibn Ezra's own order. But this is a minor caveat to Sela's truly impressive accomplishment.

As for the content, the astrological material presented in these works is highly detailed and technical, with only a few passages where Ibn Ezra addresses issues of larger theoretical or theological interest. Ibn Ezra refers to astrological doctrines in his biblical commentaries, but usually very briefly and notoriously enigmatically, and it is doubtful that a better understanding of the technical details of Ibn Ezra's astrological doctrines (as opposed to their larger themes) will illuminate the commentaries. What these texts may be most useful for is understanding the development of Ibn Ezra's thought, and its relation to his peregrinations and need for patrons.

With an editorial job of this complexity, it is unfortunately to be expected that there will be some typographical errors, and so there are. More troubling is what seems to be a serious printer's error, which I found in both of the two copies I examined: between pages 214 and 244, the pages are mixed up. Some pages duplicate those elsewhere in the book while others are omitted altogether. We are thus missing almost the entire third version of *Sefer ha-Mivharim*, as well as the notes on it, and parts of the beginning of the first version of *Sefer ha-She'elot*.

Nevertheless, what Sela has done here and is doing in this series is simply invaluable. Not only does he open up the astrological thought of Ibn Ezra himself, but he provides a doorway to the Arabic astrological tradition. Explaining technical terms, giving their history and the context of their transmission, he is contributing greatly not only to scholars of medieval Hebrew thought but to anyone interested in making sense of the basic concepts and practices of medieval astrology.

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