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Queries on Astrology Sent from Southern France to Maimonides: Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text, Translation, and Commentary

Introduction

In the closing years of the twelfth century, a circle of scholars from southern France addressed an epistle with a series of queries—I will refer to it below as *Queries*—to Maimonides in Egypt, requesting his advice on some troubling issues related to astrology. *Queries* is addressed to Maimonides as the supreme halakhic authority of the time. Together with Maimonides’ answer it belongs to the well-established literary genre of responsa (*šēʿelot u-tešuvot*). The point of departure of *Queries* is astrological ideas that had been developed by Jewish astrologers and thinkers. The authors of *Queries* are surprisingly well-informed about astrology, particularly about the doctrines of nativities and interrogations, although they also say they are not competent in it. They refer to “the scholars of our country, who have already followed the path of this science” and express alarm about its social consequences: “For some of us are overcome by melancholy as a result of thinking about the questions that we have raised in the present letter. May our Master give his response to everything, omitting nothing.”

Maimonides’ answer, the famous *Letter on Astrology*, is an im-

portant Maimonidean text.¹ It has been edited and translated into many European languages, from the sixteenth century onward. Scholars drew on it to understand Maimonides' views on astrology and other philosophical and scientific topics.² Surprisingly, however, the *Letter* has been studied in almost total neglect of the *Queries* that triggered it.³ *Queries* has been published only once, by Alexander Marx in 1926,⁴ and has not been studied at all. My purpose here is to fill this lacuna and redress the balance by an examination of *Queries*. This text must be studied independently of Maimonides' reply, because it was composed without any knowledge of Maimonides' opinions about astrology.⁵ I present a new scientific edition of the Hebrew text, accompanied by the first translation into a European language, as well as a study of the historical context of *Queries* and of its sources. This study thus has several purposes:

(1) Although Marx's *editio princeps* is excellent, I wanted to establish a new scientific edition of the Hebrew text based on a re-examination of the only extant manuscript. I was able to correct the text on the basis of my identification of various sources quoted or paraphrased by authors of *Queries*. Also, a comparison of the Hebrew text transmitted by the manuscript with another source (already used by Marx), namely, the responsum of Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai (see below, p. 132) occasionally led me to different results. Lastly, I believe I identified scribal errors overlooked by Marx; in some cases, the ensuing corrections significantly change the meaning.

(2) The Hebrew text is accompanied by an English translation to make *Queries* accessible to those who do not read Hebrew.

(3) Annotations to the translation seek to clarify major issues, explain astrological concepts and terms, identify sources, and explain the message the authors wished to convey to the addressee.

My most important finding is that the authors of *Queries* incorporated verbatim quotations and paraphrases of passages from several astrological treatises by Abraham Ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–ca. 1167)

¹ Professor Herbert A. Davidson has recently expressed doubts about the authenticity of the *Letter* or parts of it. See H. A. Davidson, "The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Maimonides," pp. 111–133 in *Me'ah She'arim, Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isidore Twersky*, ed. E. Fleischer, G. Blidstein, C. Horowitz, and B. Septimus (Jerusalem, 2001). By contrast, Maimonides' authorship of the *Letter on Astrology* has been vigorously defended by I. Shailat, *The Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides* (Jerusalem, 1995), 2:474–477, esp. p. 476 n. 6.

² For a bibliographical account, see: I.Y. Dienstag, "Iggeret ha-Rambam le-ḥakmei Šarfut ha-deromit 'al 'išṭagninut, bibliografyah šel hoša'ot, tirgumim u-meḥqarim," *Kiryat Sefer* 61 (1986/7):147–158. For some modern references to Maimonides' *Letter on Astrology*, see: S. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1958), 8:180; R. Barkai, "L'astrologie juive médiévale: Aspects théoriques et pratiques," *Moyen Age* 93 (1987):323–348; Y. T. Langermann, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991):123–158; G. Freudenthal, "Maimonides' Stance on Astrology in Context: Cosmology, Physics, Medicine, and Providence," pp. 77–90 in *Moses Maimonides, Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher*, ed. F. Rosner and S. Kottke (London, 1993); J. Kreisel, "Maimonides' Opinion of Astrology," *XI World Congress of Jewish Studies Proceedings* (Heb.) 2:3 (1994):25–32; D. Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Heb.) (Ramat Gan, 1999), pp. 92–110; S. Sela, "The Fuzzy Borders between Astronomy and Astrology as Reflected in the Thought and Work of Three Twelfth-Century Jewish Intellectuals," *Aleph* 1 (2001):59–100; M. Gómez Aranda, *Sefarad científica. Ibn Ezra, Maimónides y Zacuto* (Madrid, 2003), p. 95.

³ See, e.g., R. Lerner, "Maimonides' Letter on Astrology," *History of Religions* 8 (1968):143–158; idem, *Maimonides' Empire of Light, Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago, 2000), pp. 56–64. See also the brief reference in N. Roth, *Medieval Jewish Civilization, An Encyclopedia* (New York, 2003), s.v. "Astrology and Alchemy," pp. 595–596.

⁴ A. Marx, "The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926):312–358. This publication also included the first scientific edition of Maimonides' *Letter on Astrology*.

⁵ Shailat (*Letters* 2, pp. 474–475) believes that *Queries* was written as a response to

and that the questions addressed to Maimonides are based on them.⁶ The annotations document these borrowings from Ibn Ezra, identified in manuscripts of his astrological works. It is well known that Maimonides nowhere explicitly refers to Ibn Ezra's writings,⁷ although the latter's reputation as a biblical commentator was quickly established.⁸ Hence *Queries* and the *Letter on Astrology* constitute a sort of indirect dialogue between Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, the two towering scholars of the twelfth century.⁹

Queries also emerges as a valuable text for studying the impact of astrology on Jewish communities in southern France in the second half of the twelfth century, under the sign of the works by Abraham Bar Hiyya and Abraham Ibn Ezra and prior to the influence of the rejection of astrology expressed by Maimonides in the *Letter* and other writings.

Last but not least, we will see that the text of *Queries* is composed of two parts, written at the same time but quite distinct (for reasons that will be made clear later). In addition, although the writers refer to themselves as a homogeneous group, more than one voice may be discerned in the epistle.

The Scientific Edition of the Hebrew Text

The only extant manuscript of the Hebrew text of *Queries* is New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Mic 2384, fols. 33a–42a.¹⁰ My edition is based on the microfilm at the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem (F. 28587). Variant readings appear below the Hebrew text and indicate three categories of corrections: (a) those based on a comparison with the responsum by Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai, in Harkavy's edition (see below, §2, n. 5); (b) those based on a comparison with other sources of *Queries* (notably Abraham Ibn Ezra's works); (c) those I deemed necessary for various reasons. I have added

certain sections of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* that deal with astrology. But Maimonides himself, in his letter of response, clearly supposes that his correspondents were not familiar with the *Mishneh Torah*; the present study indeed demonstrates that the Provençal scholars were responding to quite different texts.

⁶ This possibility was raised by A. Marx ("Correspondence," p. 315 n. 10), but he did not base this idea on a comparison between the text of *Queries* and any specific part of Ibn Ezra's astrological works.

⁷ There seems to be only one reference by Maimonides to Abraham Ibn Ezra, in a letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon about a Provençal scholar, whom he calls R. Meir, the "dear scholar," and describes as a student of R. Abraham ben David of Posquières and of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (Shailat, *Letters* 2, p. 530; cf. Marx, "Correspondence," p. 327: "כשבא אצלנו ר' מאיר החכם הדיק, שהיה למד אצל ר' אברהם הרב הגדול שבפושקירש, ואצל ר' יעקב כשבא אצלנו ר' מאיר החכם הדיק, שהיה למד אצל ר' אברהם אבן עזרא נ"ע" "הרב זצ"ל ואצל ר' אברהם אבן עזרא נ"ע". The ethical will in which Maimonides supposedly admits that had he seen the "secrets" alluded to by Ibn Ezra in his commentary on the Pentateuch and in his books before he wrote his *Code* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he would have recommended them to his son, has been recognized by modern scholarship as a later forgery. See I. Twersky, "Did R. Abraham Ibn Ezra Influence Maimonides?" (Heb.), pp. 21–48 in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. I. Twersky and J.M. Harris (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1993), esp. pp. 22–23; Davidson, "Authenticity," p. 113, esp. n. 8; Shailat, *Letters* 2, pp. 697–698.

⁸ R. Judah Ibn Mosconi, in his supercommentary *Even ha-ezer* (1362–1370), claims that only nine years passed between the time Ibn Ezra wrote his commentary on the Pentateuch and the composition of one of the supercommentaries. See U. Simon, "Interpreting the Interpreter, Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's Commentaries," pp. 86–128 in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra*, ed. Twersky and Harris, esp. p. 94.

⁹ For Ibn Ezra's purported influence on Maimonides, see I. Twersky, "The Guide of the Perplexed, tr. Shlomo Pines (Review)," *Speculum* 41 (1966):555–558, esp. p. 558; Twersky, "Influence," pp. 21–48.

¹⁰ For a description of the manuscript, see Marx, "Correspondence," p. 338.

punctuation and paragraph breaks (in most cases I kept Marx's paragraph divisions and numbering). Biblical and talmudic sources are given as notes to the English translation only,¹¹ together with a few brief explanatory comments. The folios of the manuscript (א33 through א42) and the page numbers of Marx's edition (343 through 349) appear on the right of the Hebrew text. The bracketed and bold numbers in the Hebrew and English texts refer to the annotations that follow the texts.

¹¹ For the English translation, I used *The Holy Scriptures. The English Text Revised and Edited by H. Fisch* (Jerusalem, 1977).

Hebrew Text

1 לפנים בישראל [1] כה אמר האיש בלכתו לכו ונעלה עד א33
הרואה. ויורנו מדרכיו. ונלכה באורחותיו. לדעת לעות את יעף 343
דבר. ולברר התבן מן הבר. וחלפו זמנים בצוק העתים. וגברו
עונות ונהרסו ממגורות החכמות. ונפלו המדרגות. ותשאר
5 החכמה סורה וגולה. אין מנהל לה. עד אשר שלח האלהים
מושיע. מעגלי צדק מודיע. ויבן מגדל השכל והתבונה. ואין קצה
לתכונה. אז יצאה החכמה ותלבש בגדי מלכות ורקמה. כי הצור
ריחמה. ויתן לה הריון. לאות ולחזיון. ותלד בן יקיר. אשר יגדיל
תורה ויאדיר. פלא יועץ אל גבור אבי עד שר-שלום שמו. ותהי
10 המשרה על שכמו. והיה צדק אזור מותניו והאמונה אזור חלציו.
ויפתח חדרי התורה להאיר עינים. ועשה לה אזנים. הקים
בחיניו. פסג ארמונותיה. שם ינוחו יגיעי כח. וימצאו מנוח. אל
ההר הטוב הזה והלבנון אשר שם עץ הדעת. ותארכנה פארותיו.
וייף בגדלו באורך דליותיו. מים גדלוהו תהום רוממתהו. שם
15 ירבצו עניי הצאן הנדחה והצולעה. כי זאת המרגעה. וכל
הלשוניות כבידות והשפתים עמוקות. להאריך ולהעריך את יקר
תפארת מורנו משה החכם המופלג בן הרב הגדול רבי מימון
זצ"ל אשר אין קץ לשבחיו. ואין מספר לגדודיו מעלותיו. וגורת
ספיר ספריו. הן הן שלוחיו. הן הן עדיו. אלהים שלחו למחיה.
20 להצמיח ולהפריח ארץ ציה ברביב חכמתו. ויורה צדקו. המקום
ברחמיו יאריך ימיו ושנותיו וימלא משאלותיו. [2]

3 וגברו עונות] בכת"י: וגרמו העונות; תיקנתי עפ"י תהלים ט:ד. 9 יועץ אל]
בכת"י: פלא גבור אבי עד שר שלום שמו; השלמתי עפ"י ישעיהו ט:ה.

English Translation

1 Formerly in Israel, [1] when a man set out on a journey he would say: Come, let us go to the seer.¹ He will teach us his ways and we will walk in his paths,² so we may know how to sustain the weary³ and separate the chaff from the wheat.⁴ Now ages of troubled time have passed;⁵ iniquities have mounted⁶ and the garnerers of wisdom are in ruins,⁷ the terraces have fallen,⁸ and wisdom was left a wandering exile,⁹ with none to guide her,¹⁰ until the Lord sent a redeemer¹¹ who makes known the paths of righteousness.¹² He built a tower¹³ of intelligence and understanding with no limit to the store.¹⁴ Then wisdom emerged and donned royal vestments and embroidered garments. For God had mercy on her and allowed her to conceive¹⁵ as a sign and a vision;¹⁶ she bore a cherished son¹⁷ who will augment and enhance the Torah.¹⁸ *Pelev Yo'es El-Gibbor Avi Ad Sar Salom* is his name.¹⁹ Leadership is upon his shoulders,²⁰ righteousness the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.²¹ He opened the chambers of the Torah to enlighten our eyes²² and gave it ears.²³ He set up its towers²⁴ and raised her palaces.²⁵ There the weary are at rest²⁶ and find a place of repose.²⁷ In that goodly mountain region and the Lebanon,²⁸ where the Tree of the Knowledge is.²⁹ Its branches grew long.³⁰ It was fair in its size, in the length of its branches.³¹ The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall.³² There lies the poorest of the flock³³ that is driven out and limps.³⁴ For this is the place of repose.³⁵ But all speech is awkward and language heavy³⁶ to adequately extol and express appreciation of the majestic glory³⁷ of our teacher, Moses, the distinguished scholar, the son of the great rabbi, our Rabbi Maimon, may

¹ 1 Sam. 9:9. ² Isa. 2:3. ³ Isa. 50:4. ⁴ Jer. 23:28. ⁵ Dan. 9:25. ⁶ Ps. 65:4. ⁷ Joel 1:17. ⁸ Ezek. 38:20. ⁹ Isa. 49:21. ¹⁰ Isa. 51:18. ¹¹ Isa. 19:20. ¹² Ps. 23:3. ¹³ Isa. 5:2. ¹⁴ Nahum 2:10. ¹⁵ Ruth 4:13. ¹⁶ Isa. 22:1. ¹⁷ Jer. 31:19. ¹⁸ Isa. 42:21. ¹⁹ Isa. 9:5. ²⁰ Isa. 9:5. ²¹ Isa. 11:5. ²² Ezra 9:8. ²³ Prov. 20:12. ²⁴ Isa. 23:13.

the memory of the righteous be a blessing. His praises are unlimited and the armies of his virtues are without number.³⁸ His books are encircled by sapphire.³⁹ They are his messengers, they are his jewels. God has sent him to preserve life,⁴⁰ to make a barren and desolate land sprout and blossom with the showers of his wisdom and the early rain of his righteousness. May God in his mercy grant him a long life and fulfill his wishes. [2]

2 Now, our Rabbi, our Master, our Gaon, the beacon of Israel that spreads light throughout the Diaspora, we your servants who dwell in the tents⁴¹ of Edom⁴² have come from a faraway country to obtain sustenance⁴³ from your treasury of wisdom and draw water from your fount⁴⁴ of erudition. It occurred to a number of our group to inquire of our Master about what was said by our Rabbis, may their memory be a blessing, namely, "There is no *mazzal* [3] for Israel."⁴⁵ [4] We have come upon the following responsum by [the Geonim] Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai [5]: "The astrologers who gaze at the stars⁴⁶ [6] are of two types. [7] Some of them attribute everything to the stars [*mazzal*], saying that even a man's movements and even his inner thoughts depend on the stars. [8] From there the influence of the stars descends here and things happen here according to what transpires there. All earthly affairs are like a wax planchet waiting to be stamped. The heavenly constellations [*mazzalot*] are like a seal that is prepared and stamps its own image upon the coin without addition or diminution. These [astrologers] do not acknowledge the Holy one, blessed be He, [9] and have nothing to do with our concerns. A second type [of as-

²⁵ Ps. 48:14. ²⁶ Job 3:17. ²⁷ Isa. 34:14. ²⁸ Deut. 3:25. ²⁹ Gen. 2:9. ³⁰ Ezek. 31:5. ³¹ Ezek. 31:7. ³² Ezek. 31:4. ³³ Zech. 11:7. ³⁴ Micah 4:6. ³⁵ Isa. 28:12. ³⁶ Ezek. 3:5-6. ³⁷ Esth. 1:4. ³⁸ Job 25:3. ³⁹ Lam. 4:7. ⁴⁰ Gen. 45:5. ⁴¹ Gen. 9:27. ⁴² That is, in the Christian countries. ⁴³ Gen. 42:7 et passim. ⁴⁴ Isa. 12:3. ⁴⁵ B Shabbat 156a. ⁴⁶ Isa. 47:13.

2 ועתה רבינו אדונינו גאונינו נר ישראל מאיר עיני הגולה, הנה עבדיך אלה השוכנים באהלי ארץ אדום באו מארץ רחוקה לשבור אוכל מאוצר חכמתך ולשאוב ממעין תבונותיך. ועלה על לב קצת מבני חבורתינו לשאול מלפני אדונינו על מה שאמרו רבותינו ז"ל אין מזל [3] לישראל. [4] וראינו לר' שרירא ולר' האי ז"ל בתשובה שאלה [5] כלשון הזה: ובעלי אסטגנינות החוים בכוכבים [6] אינון תרין גוני. [7] אית מנהון מאן דתאלי כל מילי במזל ואמרין אפילו תנודות של אדם ואפי' רחשישי לבו תליין במזל. [8] ומן התם הוא דנחתי להכא ולפום מא דאית התם אית הכא. וכל עיסקי דארעא כמין מטבע של שעה דמונח להחתם. ומזלות שמים כמין חותם שמכינים אותם וטובעין בדיוקני שלו דלא מוסיף ולא גארע. ואילין לית בהון מאן דמודה בהקב"ה [9] ומובדלים הם מדברים שלנו. ואיכא מנהון גונא אחרינא דאמרין אדם עושה בחכמתו [10] דברים שלא המזל גרמן ויכול בדעתו לכוף מאי דגרם המזל. והו נמי תרי גוני. מנהון מאן דתאלי לה למילתא בנפשו של אדם ואומ' שנפשו ורוחו שלאדם עליונות היא וגוהר [11] שלה ועיקרה למעלה מן הכוכבים והמזלות ויכולה

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ב34

30 רחשישי לבן בכת"י: רחשישי; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הרכבי. 33 שמכינים] כך בכת"י. בנוסח הרכבי ומרקס: שמכנים. 33 ולא גארע] חסר בכת"י; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הרכבי ומרקס. 35 גונא] כך בכת"י; בנוסח הרכבי: גנשה. 37 מאן] בכת"י: מאי; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הרכבי ומרקס.

40 היא ואף הוא יכול בכוחה לשנויי מה דגרם מזל. ומנהון מאן
 דתאלי למילתא ברבון העולמי' ב"ה ואומ' ויברא באדם יכולת
 לכוף מה שגרם מזלו. ובין להני ובין להני דהאי גיסא אחרון
 דגרים מזל חם אתי בעידניה לאילין יכול אדם למשתי מקראני
 ומצטנן בהון [12] ולאילין דהקב"ה כדניחא קמיה לאצלויה
 45 ולמדחי מיניה דחי.

3 וכן ראינו בתשובת הגאונים ז"ל אשר הזכרנו לפני רבי'
 וכלשונה נאמרה. ויש מתחכמים בדבר ואומ' בדברי הגאונים
 ז"ל ולא נאמרו אלא במי שראוי לבוא עליו חולי חם בזמן ידוע
 כפי מערכת כוכבי מולדו ויכול קודם לכן להשמר ולשתות
 50 משקיות קרים לצנן ולישר תולדות גופו. [13][14] אבל מי
 שנגזרה עליו מיתה ביום ידוע כפי מערכת כוכבי מולדו [15] לא
 תועיל שמירה קודם לכן.

א35

41 ויברא] כך בכת"י; נוסח הרכבי ומרקס: דברא. 42 גיסא אחרון דגרים] כך בכת"י;
 נוסח הרכבי: נסא אחרון כד גארים. 43 לאילין] בכת"י: לולאין; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח
 הרכבי ומרקס. 44 ומצטנן בהון] כך בכת"י; נוסח הרכבי: ומצטנן בהון ולא חיים
 גופיה. 44 לאצלויה] כך בכת"י; נוסח הרכבי: לאצוליה; נוסח מרקס: לאציליה.

trologers] says that man, by means of his wisdom, [10] can do things that are not predetermined by the stars and that man can, by means of his knowledge, overcome what has been predetermined by the star. And those [who belong to the second type] are divided into two further types. There are those who presume things to be dependent on the human soul and say that the human soul and spirit are of a higher rank, that their substance [11] and principle are above the stars and zodiacal constellations, and that owing to its [the soul's] power, man can alter things that have been predetermined by the star. But others [the second type] presume that things are dependent on Almighty God, and they say that God created in man the ability to change what has been predetermined by the star. For both the first and the second [subtype], when the star provokes fever at a certain time, [those who presume things to be dependent upon the human soul] say that man can drink cold beverages in order to cool himself; [12] whereas those [who presume that things are dependent] upon the Holy One, blessed be He, [say that] when it suits Him [He ordains] deliverance, and [when it suits Him He ordains] that he be rebuffed he is rebuffed [i.e., succumbs]."

3 This is what we found in the responsum of the Geonim of blessed memory, which we mentioned to our Rabbi and quoted verbatim. And there are those who speak wisely⁴⁷ about this matter and maintain that the sayings of the Geonim, their memory for a blessing, refer only to a person who is ordained to be ill with fever at a certain time because of the configuration of the stars of his nativity and that such a person can protect himself beforehand by drinking cold beverages so as to cool down and balance the temperament of his body. [13] [14] But a person who has been doomed to death on a certain day because of the configuration of the stars of his nativity [15] will not be helped by any preventive measure.

⁴⁷ For this translation, see below, §3 n. 38.

4 ודבר זה לא תסבול דעתינו ולא תכלכל מחשבותינו. כי לפי
 דבריהם יהיה ענין גזרות הכוכבים [16] והמזלות כאחד ממנהגי
 התולדות המתוקנות בעולם למן היום אשר ברא אלהים אדם,
 55 אין להוסיף ואין לגרוע. ולעניות דעתינו ומיעוט שכלינו מי
 שעומד על זאת הסברא מניא לב אנשי התורה ונועל דלת בפני
 בעלי התפלה. כי כל אחד ואחד בלבו ישית איך ישתנו עליו
 סדרי בראשית לצאת מגבול גזרות מערכות הכוכבים והמזלות,
 60 וישים בקרבו מחשב לדמות אותן שאמרו ז"ל: הרי זו תפלת
 שוא. [17]

5 ובעוונותינו אין הדורות האלה ראויין לכך שישנה השם
 תולדות העולם בעבורם. ואם יעברו תחת שבט הכוכבים
 ומבטם, [18] הלמתים תעשה פלא לחיותם? על דברת בני
 65 האדם אשר תולדותם חלושה מיום הולדם ואין בטבעם שיחיו
 שנים רבות לא דברנו, רק על מיתה [19] הנגזרת על גוף האדם
 במשפטי הכוכבים [20] וטבעו חזק ובריא ויורו עליו הכוכבים
 מיתה משונה או מיתה עצמה או שאר מקרים קשים, ואין ראוי
 שיבוא עליו כי אם על ידי סבה או פשיעה ולא מחלישות
 70 תולדות גופו אשר ביום הבראו כוננו.

בב5

63 שבט בכת"י: השבט; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

4 This is something that our intellect cannot tolerate nor our mind accept. For in their view the decrees of the stars [16] and of the zodiacal constellations [*mazzalot*] are as one of the natural processes that obtain in the world since the day when God created man;⁴⁸ nothing can be added or subtracted.⁴⁹ In our humble opinion and limited understanding, a person who maintains that position deters people from believing in the Torah and slams the door before those who put their faith in prayers. For [if this were the case,] everyone would understand that the order established with the creation cannot possibly be altered for his sake so that he might escape the decrees of the configurations of the stars and of the zodiacal constellations. He would liken them [the prayers] in his thought to what [our Rabbis], their memory for a blessing, said: "This is a futile prayer."⁵⁰ [17]

5 Indeed, because of our sins the current generations do not deserve that God change the natural order of the world for them. If they are controlled by the stars and their aspects, [18] wilt Thou work wonders for the dead⁵¹ and resurrect them? We do not refer to people⁵² whose physical nature is feeble from the day of their birth and whose natural makeup does not allow them to live many years. We refer only to death [19] ordained upon the human body by the judgments of the stars, [20] although its makeup is strong and healthy; but the stars indicate an unnatural death for him, or death itself,⁵³ or other terrible occurrences, things that he does not deserve except as the consequence of a [divine] cause or crime, but not because of the feebleness of his corporal temperament, which was set on the day he was formed.

⁴⁸ Deut. 4:32. ⁴⁹ Eccles. 3:14. ⁵⁰ B Bava Meši'a³ 42a, Beraḳot 54a et passim. ⁵¹ Ps. 88:11. ⁵² Eccles. 3:18. ⁵³ B Shabbat 156b.

6 על דבד זה הציקתנו רוח בטנינו. ותמהנו מה נשתנה דבר חכמת המזלות [21] משאר החכמות: כי בחכמות הרפואות יש יתרון גדול בעולם אבל בזאת החכמה רב כעס. [22] ולא עוד אלא שאלה החכמים הורסים יסודות האמונה [23] אם ישימו ענין המזלות כיתד שלא תמוט. לפי דבריהם ידמו קצת בני אדם תפלותם לאותן שאמרו רבותי' ז"ל הרי זו תפלת שוא, לפי שאין אדם עושה צדקה ומתפלל על המת שיחיה, ולפי סברתם קצת הנבראים קרואים מתים בחיים. ואמנם החיים והעושר והשמחה מאת הבורא יבוקשו. ואע"פ שיש בדברי רבותי' ז"ל חיי ובני מזוני לא בזכותא תליא מילתא אלא במזלא תליא מילתא, [24] אין דעתינו רחבה כל כך להבין דבריהם ולפרוק משא הקושיות אשר בתלמוד נמצאות. ובכמה מקומות בתורה בנביאים ובכתובים ובדברי רבותי' ז"ל נמצא כי הזכות תועיל בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא. וראינו בדברי רבינו שרירא ורבינו האי גאון ז"ל בתשובה שסמכו על מי שאמ' אין מזל לישראל.

7 על כן משתדלים אנו לחקור מלפני רבי' גאונינו להודיענו האמת על כל הרע שיורינו חכמי המזלות. [25] אם יודעים לכל זמן, ואם אפשר להשמר קודם לכן על פי חכם. כי נמצא בספרי החכמים, [26] אם תהיה מערכת כוכב פל' ופל' במקום פלוני יארע לו כך, ואם כוכב פל' יארע כך. ויש בהם שפירשו הנזק, ויש שלא יפרשו [27] הנזק מה הוא ומאין יבוא ומתי יהיה.

74 יסודות] בכת"י: סודות; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 90 בהם] בכת"י: בם; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

6 For that reason the spirit within us constrains us.⁵⁴ We are baffled by the difference between the science of the zodiacal signs [*mazzalot*] [21] and the other sciences; for whereas in medical science there is great worldly benefit, this science increases sorrow.⁵⁵ [22] Moreover, these scholars [knowledgeable in astrology] destroy the foundations of faith [23] by positing astrology as an immovable peg. According to their views, the prayers of certain people are like [those of which] our Rabbis, their memory for a blessing, said: "This is a futile prayer."⁵⁶ For no man gives charity and prays in order to resurrect the dead, and according to their opinion some creatures are called dead while still alive. But life, wealth, and happiness should be sought from God. Even though our Rabbis, their memory for a blessing, said: "Length of life, children, and sustenance depend not on merit but on astrological fate [*mazzal*],"⁵⁷ [24] our mind is inadequate to understand their words and to resolve the difficult issues found in the Talmud. In several places in the Torah, in the Prophets, and in the Hagiographa, as well as in the sayings of our Rabbis, their memory for a blessing, we find that merits are beneficial both in this world and in the world to come. We have already noted that in their responsum the Geonim Sherira and Hai concurred with him who said, "there is no *mazzal* for Israel."⁵⁸

7 Therefore we eagerly inquire of our Rabbi, our Gaon, that he let us know the truth about all the evil that the astrologers [25] prognosticate for us. Namely, whether they know a time for everything⁵⁹ and whether it is possible to protect oneself by [asking the advice of] some scholar [knowledgeable in astrology]. For it is found in the books of these scholars [26] that if a configuration of certain stars occurs in such-and-such a place, such-and-such an event will befall him, but if another star is involved, a different event will befall [him]. Some of them make

⁵⁴ Job 32:18. ⁵⁵ Eccles. 1:18. ⁵⁶ B Bava Meši'a³ 42a, Beraḳot 54a et passim. ⁵⁷ B Mo'ed Qatan 28a. ⁵⁸ B Shabbat 156a. ⁵⁹ Eccles. 3:1.

the [upcoming] harm explicit, but others make explicit [27] neither what the harm is, nor whence it will come, nor when it will occur.

8 We now proceed to write down some of those details. A man will die of unnatural sicknesses. He will die at the hands of robbers. He will be imprisoned. He will die an unnatural death together with many others. He will suffer from a permanent deformity. His wealth will be taken from him. He will bring upon himself [a chain of] causes and bring about his own death. He will be taken prisoner while traveling. He will be held hostage. Misfortune will befall him in mid-life. His end will be bad. He will suffer many troubles. He will always be poor. He will suffer from depression his entire life [and be] full of anxiety and fear of death. His brother will suffer from a chronic illness. All his brothers will die during his lifetime. Most of his sons will die [during his lifetime]. There are other incidents as well, namely the sword, fire, water, wild beasts, collapsing buildings, falling from a high place, and other calamities. [28]

9 Concerning all these things we inquire of our Rabbi and our Master: Can a scholar [well-versed in astrology] know [in advance] the beginning of all the aforementioned future calamities? Can [knowing] each decree according to its nature help save a man from his misfortune? And assuming that the astrologers' opinions are well-founded, can they discern whether [the future calamities] will come through human deeds or from Heaven? [29] We also inquire of our Master about the aforementioned calamities and poverty, depression, anxiety, and fear of death: Is there any cure for all these misfortunes?

10 It is found in the books of the scholars [well-versed in astrology] that from the son's nativity they can know the astrological fate [*mazzal*] of the father, that is, his death and the circumstances of his life. Can our Master tell us whether they can know [also] all the favorable or in-

8 ובאנו לכתוב קצת מפרטיהם ואלו הן: ימות בחולים משונים. ימות מיד הלסטין. יעמוד בבית הסהר. ימות עם אנשים רבים במיתה משונה. מום קבוע יהיה לו. יוקח ממונו. יסבב סבות ויהרוג עצמו. ילקח בדרך. ילך בשביה. יבוא עליו הרע בחצי ימיו. אחריתו לא טובה. צרות רבות יעברו עליו. לעולם יהיה עני. יעמוד כל ימיו בשממון ובדאגה ובפחד המות. או חולי קבוע יהיה באָחיו ימותו כל אָחיו בחייו. ימותו רוב בניו. ויש כמה מקרים אחרים: חרב. אש. ומים. חיות רעות. מפולת. נפילה ממקום גבוה וכמה עניינים רעים. [28]

ב36

9 ועליהן ועל אלה אנו חוקרין מלפני רבינו אדונינו אם יכול חכם לדעת תחלת הפורענות בכל אלה העתידות אשר הזכרנו. ואם יש תועלת להציל אדם מרעתו בכל גזירה לפי ענינה. וגם כי ידי חכמי המזלות יסודין אם יוכלו להבחין אם יבואו בידי אדם או בידי שמים. [29] ולענין הצרות והעניות והשממון והדאגה ופחד המות אשר הזכרנו לפני אדונינו יודיענו אם יש רפואה לדברים הללו.

10 ונמצא בספרי החכמי' כי במולד הבן יכירו מזל האב בכַרְת חייו ומקריו. ויודיענו מרינו אם יכירו כל עניין אחי הנולד, הן

93 ימות מיד הלסטין] בכת"י: ימות הלסטין; מרקס: ימות על ידי הלסטין; השלמתי עפ"י נוסח הראב"ע (ראה להלן, §8, הערה 28, עמ' 149). 96 לא] בכת"י: אל; תיקנתי עפ"י הקשר הדברים. 98 באָחיו] בכת"י: באחיו מאחיו; מרקס: באחד מאחיו; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הראב"ע (ראה להלן, §8, הערה 28, עמ' 154). 100 ממקום] בכת"י: מקום; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

110 לטובה הן לרעה, כמו שיכירו עניין אבי הנולד ובניו. כוכב פל' יורה על הגדולים פל' על האמצעים ופל' על הקטנים, ואלו באח מה יורו? גם אנו שואלים כי יקרה לפנייהם מערכת כוכבים פל' שיוורו שימותו כל אָקִיו בימיו או ימותו רוב בניו אם יוכלו לדעת באיזה מיתה. אם ידינו סדר מיתתם, הגדול לפי גדלו והקטן לפי קטנו, מתי ימות זה ואחר כך ימות זה? וגם כשִׁדִּינו [30] חולי קבוע יהיה באחד מֵאָקִיו, אם ידינו מה הוא ומי הוא ומתי יהיה? [31]

א37

11 וגם אנו חוקרים אם מה שיכירו באחים יכירו באחי האב, כי נרמז בספרייהם הבית השלישי יורה על הקרובים והחתנים, [32] ולא פירשו יותר. גם נזדמן בספרי חכמתם בבית הרביעי גורל האב וגורל אבי האב. [33] ואחרי כן, כשהרויחו לפרש כל ענין האב, לא דברו מאומה. [34] ועל זה אנו שואלים אם יכירו כל עניין אבי האב כמו עניין האב.

120

111 ואלו] בכת"י: ולא. תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 112 יקרה לפנייהם] בכת"י: יקרא לפניכם; תיקנתי עפ"י הקשר הדברים. 114 ידינו] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: יבינו; תיקנתי עפ"י הקשר הדברים. ראה להלן, §9, הערה 30. 116 ידינו] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: יבינו; ראה לעיל הערה 33. 121 כשהרויחו] בכת"י: הרויחו; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

auspicious events in the life of the newborn's brothers, just as they know the fate of the newborn's father and [the newborn's] sons. If a certain star indicates the fate of the older [brothers], another star [indicates the fate of] the middle [brothers], and yet another star [indicates the fate of] the younger [brothers], what will the stars [that are in charge] of the newborn himself indicate? We also ask whether, if they encounter a certain configuration of stars that ordains that all of the [newborn's] brothers will die during his lifetime, or that most of his sons will die, they can know by what kind of death. Can they pronounce their judgment about the order in which they will die, the oldest first and the youngest last, when one will die and when the other? If [the astrologers] pronounce their judgment [30] to the effect that some chronic disease will befall one of the [newborn's] brothers, can they determine the nature of the disease, who will be affected, and when? [31]

11 We also inquire whether what can be known about the [newborn's] brothers may be also known about the father's brothers, since it is hinted in their books that the third [horoscopic] house indicates [the fate of] the relatives and in-laws, [32] though they [the books] are not more explicit. The books of their science also mention the lot of the father and the lot of the father's father in the fourth [horoscopic] house. [33] After that, when they discussed the entire matter of the father in more detail, they said nothing. [34] Because of this, we ask whether they can know the entire matter of the father's father as they know the matter of the father.

125 12 ויודיענו רבי' גאונינו, מאור עינינו, אם יש תועלת והצלחה בכל אלה שהזכרנו על פי חכם לפי שינדע מזלו, כדי שנוכל לומר על מי שאינו יודע מזלו שלא תדמה תפלתו לאותן שאמרו רבותינו ז"ל הרי זו תפלת שוא. [35]

346

130 13 ושמענו בשם חכמי המזלות כי מי שנולד במערכת רעה יועיל לו שינוי מקום. [36] ואם אמת הוא יודיענו אדונינו אם אפשר שינצל מכל הרע הנגזר עליו כפי מערכת כוכב מולדו בשנוי מקומו. וגם יודיענו מרי' אם המרחק שיהיה לכול המולדות אשר הם במערכת רעה, או אם יש מולד אחד שצריך להרחיק יותר ממולד אחר. [37] ואם אמת נכון הדבר יודיענו אדונינו המרחק הראוי להיות שיהיה לכל.

בב37

135 14 וגם שמענו בשם פילוסוף אחד ישמעאלי [38] אשר היה בארצנו שאמ' אין כח בשום חכם מחכמי המזלות לגזור על בירור כך וכך יהיה. לפי שיש לגלגל העליון [39] כחות משתנים לרגעים על הנבראים, כמו שיש לכוכבים ולמזלות. ואין אדם יכול לעמוד בהן. ופעמים שכחות גלגל העליון יחליפו כח הכוכבים להפך. ודבר זה לא נמסר להבחין לשום חכם בעולם. על כן לא יוכל אדם לדון במשפטי הכוכבים [40] דבר נכון.

140

131 (המולדות) בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: מזלות. תיקנתי עפ"י המשך המשפט ("מולד אחד שצריך להרחיק יותר ממולד אחר"). ראה גם להלן, §13, הערה 37. 135 ישמעאלי בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: ישמעאל; תיקנתי עפ"י הקשר הדברים.

12 We solicit our Rabbi, our Gaon, the light of our eyes, to inform us whether, in everything mentioned above, there is utility and succor if a person asks the advice of some scholar [knowledgeable in astrology], inasmuch as his astrological fate [*mazzal*] will be known [to him], so that we can say whether the prayer of a person who does not know his astrological fate is in the category [of the supplications about which] our Rabbis, their memory for a blessing, said, "this is a futile prayer."⁶⁰ [35]

13 We have also heard in the name of the astrologers that one who was born in an inauspicious configuration [of the stars] will benefit from changing his place of residence. [36] If this is true, will our Master inform us whether changing your place of residence can save you from all the calamities decreed by the configuration of the stars of your nativity. We also ask our Master to inform us whether the distance [of the change of place] is equal for all the inauspicious nativities, or whether one nativity requires a greater distance than another nativity. [37] If this is really true, will our Master inform us what equal distance should be assigned to all of them.

14 We have also heard of one Muslim philosopher [38] who lived in our country and said that no astrologer is capable of pronouncing categorically that such and such an event will occur. This is because the uppermost orb, [39] like the stars and the zodiacal constellations [*mazzalot*], has powers that change their effect on created beings from one instant to another. And nobody is able to withstand these powers. Sometimes the powers of the uppermost orb reverse the power of the stars. This phenomenon cannot be fathomed by any scholar in the world. Hence no one can make a true assessment in the judgments of the stars. [40] Nothing is hidden from our Master, and he [surely]

⁶⁰ See above, n. 103.

ומאדו' לא נעלם דבר, והוא יודע סוף דברי הפילוסוף אם יש ממש בדבריו.

145 15 וגם שמענו שיש מחכמי המזלות שידינו על פי שאלת אדם [41] אע"פ שלא ידעו מולדו. [42] ויש מן החכמים שאמרו כי השאלות אין בהן ממש. וזה טעמם: כי כל מה שיקרה בתחתונים הוא בעבור תנועות העליונות על הנבראים כפי תולדותם. ובעבור שנשמת האדם עליונה יוכל להשמר ולהוסיף וגם לגרוע. על כן לא יורו העליונים על כל השאלות שתעלה על לב האדם. ויש חכמים אחרים שאמרו כי דיני השאלות בכוכבים נכונים כדיני המולדות. וזה טעמם: כי מחשבות הנפש תשתנה כפי השתנות תולדות הגוף. והנה כח הנשמה יתהפך כפי התהפך כח הגוף, ואחר שהכוכבים יורו על תולדות הגוף והתהפכו הנה נוכל לדעת המחשבות והשאלות. [43]

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א38

16 ויורינו מורינו דעתו אם יש ממש בדיני השאלות. ואם יש אדם שגמר בלבו וגלה דעתו שאין רצונו לשאול ולדעת מזלו מ טוב ועד רע, ואחרי אשר ידעו אנשים שאין רצונו בכך יבואו וישאלו עליו שלא בפניו. לולי שידעו שכך דעתו לא היו

151 נכונים כדיני המולדות חסר בכת"י; מרקס: יש בהם ממש; השלמתי ע"י נוסח הראב"ע (ראה להלן, §15, הערה 43).

entirely understands the philosopher's ideas and knows whether there is any substance in them.

15 We have also heard that some astrologers pronounce their judgments on the basis of questions [41] posed to them by a man, even though they have no knowledge of the inquirer's nativity. [42] Some astrologers have maintained that the [doctrine of foretelling the future in response to] questions is of no substance. This is their reasoning: Everything that occurs to [the bodies of] the lower world is caused by the movements of the upper bodies, [which affect] created beings according to their physical nature. Because man's soul is superior, he can protect himself, namely [deliberately] increasing or reducing [what is caused by the stars]. Therefore the upper bodies do not give an indication about all the questions that men may entertain. But other scholars asserted that the judgments [based on the doctrine] of [posing] questions through the stars are as trustworthy as the judgments based on [the doctrine of] naticities. This is their reasoning: The thoughts of the mind change in accordance with the change of the physical nature of the body. Therefore, the power of the soul is altered according to the variation of the power of the body; and since the stars indicate the physical nature of the body and how it is altered, we can know the thoughts and [the answers to] questions. [43]

16 May our Master inform us of his opinion on whether there is substance in the [astrological] judgments [based on the doctrine of posing] questions. [Consider the following situation:] Someone made up his mind and even made it public that he does not wish to [turn to an astrologer and] ask any question in order to know his astrological fate [mazzal], be it fortunate or unfortunate. Other people, however, aware that he does not want to, go ask about him *in absentia*. Had they been unaware that this was his decision, they would not have asked about him. May our Master inform us whether, in the opinion of the scholars

160 שואלים עליו. יגיד לנו מורינו אם השאלה ההיא נכונה כשאר שאלות לפי דעת החכמים המודים בדיני השאלות. [44]

165 17 וגם באנו לחקור מלפני רבינו מאור עינינו על דבר אחר. כי יש חכמים אשר יגידו הרע הראוי לבוא במשפטי הכוכבים, אבל אין חכמתם רחבה כל כך [45] לדעת שורש דבר ותחלת הפורענות מתי תהיה, לא בדיני השאלות ולא בדיני המולדות. ואם יתכן בעיני מורינו להורות ולהראות כלל אחד אשר ממנו יצא תלמוד לכל הגזרות מתי תבואנה. יבוא נא דבר אדונינו אולי יועיל להסתר ביום אף ה'.

170 18 אם דבר זה הוא עמוק שלא נוכל להתבונן יכתוב אדונינו בלשון חכמתו, אולי יבינו וילמדו חכמי ארצינו אשר דרכו בדרך החכמה הזאת. [46] ואנחנו הכותבים לפני רבינו לא נסינו ללכת בדרך אלה החכמות ולבינו קטון מהכיל העולה על לב החכמים. וכל מה שהזכרנו לא הזכרנו רק על פי השמועה. וכל מה שיתכן לפני מורינו להבינו מכל מה ששאלנו יבאר לנו באר היטב.

175 19 והוזקנו רבי' לשאל מלפני כבודך בכל אלה לישר אורחינו ולְאֹר עינינו ולחַקְמֵינו. כי אתה רְגָלִים לְפֶסֶחַ ועיני עור תפקח. ומשכות כסיל תפתח. ויִדְעו תועי רוח בינה ורוגנים ילמדו

177 ומשכות] בכת"י: ומשכות; תיקנתי עפ"י איוב לח:לא.

who endorse the [astrological] judgments [based on the doctrine of posing] questions, this question is as sound as the other questions. [44]

17 We have also come to inquire of our Rabbi, the light of our eyes, about another issue: Some scholars foretell the evil that should occur as a result of the judgments of the stars, but their science is not broad enough [45] to determine the cause and when the calamity will begin, neither through judgments [based on the doctrine of posing] questions nor through judgments [based on the doctrine] of nativities. Perhaps our Master can instruct us and point out a single rule from which we can infer a lesson as to when all misfortunes will occur. We await our Master's word; perhaps it will help us find shelter in the day of the Lord's anger.⁶¹

18 If the matter is so profound that we cannot comprehend it, let our Master explain it in his learned language. Perhaps the scholars of our country, who have already followed the path of this science, [46] will be able to understand and learn. As for us, who write [this epistle] to our Rabbi, we have neither tried to walk in the path of these sciences nor is our understanding adequate to encompass what scholars conceive. Everything we mentioned above we mentioned only on the basis of what we have heard. Whatever our Master can teach us about everything we have asked, may he explain it to us very clearly.

19 Our Master, we needed to ask your honor about all these issues in order to straighten our paths, give light to our eyes, and increase our wisdom. You are legs for the lame;⁶² you make the blind see; you loosen the cords of the fool.⁶³ May those who err in spirit come to under-

⁶¹ Zeph. 2:3. ⁶² Job 29:15. ⁶³ Job 38:31. This puns on the word *kesil*, which in Job refers to the constellation Orion but also means *fool*, thus paralleling the "blind" in the previous clause.

לקח. ואשרי אנשיך העומדים לפניך השומעים את חכמתך
ונחל עדניך תשקם והיו באוכלי שולחניך.

180 20 מכנף הארץ זמירות שמעך. וכל העולם מכריז טבעך. הוד
והדר עטריך. ותורה וחכמה וענוה כתריך. אתה חותם תכנית
מלא חכמות עצומות ותמצא כקן ידך לאסוף בגזי שכלך כולם
נקבצו אליך. ועתה רבינו אדונינו גאוננו מחול על כבודך ויבוא
נא דברך הטוב לנו. והוד ממך תצא תורה להורות הדרך
185 הישרה. ומסור לנו מפתח אחד על כל מה ששאלנו והיה לפתח
ולתועלת גדולה להסיר כמה ספיקות ולהשקיט שאון תמהון
הלבבות. וחבר לנו רבי' הדברים האלה כללים ופרטים
מפורשים כדי שנוכל להבין.

21 ואם נא מצאנו חן בעיניך השיבנו על ראשון ראשון ועל
190 אחרון אחרון ולא יחסר דבר. והנה כתבנו לפני אדונינו בענין
המולדות דברים. ושאלנו מלפניו אם יש תועלת להנצל מהם
ומכל רע אשר יורו חכמי המזלות. וגם הזכרנו לפני רבי' שאם
יתכן לפניו להורות כלל אחד ללמוד ממנו דרך התועלת לכל
גזרה וגזרה לפי ענינה. יכתוב אדונינו בלשון חכמתו, ואם לא
195 נבין אנחנו, אולי יבינו וילמדו חכמי ארצינו. וכל מה שיתכן
לפני מורינו להשיב על כל מה ששאלנו מפורש ושום שכל,
ישיב כדי שנוכל להבין. כי לא נסינו ללכת בדרך זו החכמה
והיא רחוקה ממנו. וגם שאלנו מלפני גאוננו אם יועיל שינוי

בב

178 השומעים] בכת"י: השומרים. תיקנתי עפ"י דברי הימים ב ט:ו. 179 ונחל עדניך
תשקם] בכת"י: תשקם מטל עדניך; תיקנתי עפ"י תהלים לו:ט.

standing and they that murmur learn a lesson.⁶⁴ Happy are thy men
who stand before thee and hear your wisdom;⁶⁵ thou makest them to
drink of the river of thy pleasures,⁶⁶ and may they dine at your table.⁶⁷

20 From the uttermost part of the earth have we heard⁶⁸ your fame;
all the world declares your prominence. Honor and majesty are your
diadems. Torah and wisdom and modesty are your crowns. Thou art a
seal and a paragon, full of great sciences,⁶⁹ which your hand has
managed to collect like a nest⁷⁰ in the treasure house of your intellect;
all of them gather together and come to you. And now, our Rabbi, our
Master, our Gaon, forgo the honor due to yourself and favor us with
your good words of guidance. May the Torah emerge from your
majesty to teach us the right path. Provide us with a single key to all we
have asked, which will open [our minds] and be very useful to remove
certain doubts and still the tumult and perplexity of [our] hearts. We
beg our Rabbi to write his statements and to couch them in terms of
general rules and explicit details, so that we may understand.

21 If we have found favor in your eyes, be so good as to respond [to
our questions] in order⁷¹ and leave nothing out. We have written to our
Master about some topics related to the [doctrine of] nativities.⁷² We
have asked whether there is any benefit [in trying] to save oneself from
them⁷³ and from any evil that the astrologers prognosticated.⁷⁴ We have
also mentioned to our Rabbi: Perhaps he can show us one rule from
which we may learn a way that is useful for all the decrees [of the stars],⁷⁵
each decree according to its nature.⁷⁶ We ask our Master to write in a
language befitting his wisdom, and if we do not understand, perhaps the

⁶⁴ Isa. 29:24. ⁶⁵ 2 Chron. 9:7. ⁶⁶ Ps. 36:9. ⁶⁷ 1 Kings 2:7. ⁶⁸ Isa. 24:16. ⁶⁹ Ezek.
28:12. ⁷⁰ Isa. 10:14. ⁷¹ M Avot 5:7. ⁷² See above, §§7 and 8. ⁷³ That is, from the harm
caused by the stars. ⁷⁴ See above, §9. ⁷⁵ See above, §§17 and 20. ⁷⁶ See above, §9.

200 מקום וגם הזכרנו דבר הפילוסוף. וגם חקרנו בדברי דיני השאלות שני דרכים. וכתבנו דברים בענין אחי הנולד ובניו וענין אחי האב, אם ידינו מדת ימיו ומקרו על העתיד, כמו מן האב וגם מאבי האב נשאל אם יכירו.

205 22 על הכל יתן עינו אדנינו הרב הגדול מאיר עינינו להשיב על כל דברי האגרת הזאת. כי עבדיך באו מארץ רחוקה לשאול מלפני כבודך. על כן, אדונינו, מחול על כבודך והשיבנו על כל שאילתנו בכתב רשום אמת ולא יחסר דבר, כדי שלא נצטרך לשאול פעם אחרת.

210 23 וכמה דברים נשאלו מלפני הגאונים הראשונים זכרם לברכה והם ענו את הכל. וגם אתה תתן בידינו ותבוא נא שאלותינו כי עיני כל ישראל עליך. ואשרי המחכה ויגיע לראות תשובתך היקרה והמאירה, והיה זה שלום כי תעבור בארצנו ותנוח לגורלינו. וחיים רב לאדונינו הרב הגדול לעולם אשר ממנו דבר לא נעלם דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו.

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scholars of our country will understand and learn.⁷⁷ We beg our Master to respond to our questions, clearly and giving the sense,⁷⁸ so that we may understand. For we have not tried to walk in the path of this science, which is remote from us.⁷⁹ We have also asked our Gaon whether there is any benefit in changing one's place of residence⁸⁰ and we mentioned the statement of the [Muslim] philosopher.⁸¹ We also inquired about two approaches related to the judgments [based on the doctrine of posing] questions.⁸² And we wrote about the newborn's brother and sons,⁸³ about the father's brother, [that is,] whether they can pronounce judgment about their longevity and the future circumstances of their lives, and also about the newborn's father and the father's father.⁸⁴

22 We ask our Master, the great Rabbi, the light of our eyes, to look at all this and respond to all the points of this epistle.⁸⁵ For your servants have come from a distant land⁸⁶ to ask your honor about this. Therefore, forgo your honor and respond to all our questions in writing, in truth,⁸⁷ leaving nothing out, so that we will not find it necessary to ask you again.

23 Some things were already asked of the earlier Geonim of blessed memory and they answered all the questions posed to them. [We trust that] you, too, will give us⁸⁸ [an answer] and reply to our questions, since the eyes of all Israel are turned to you.⁸⁹ Blessed is he that waiteth and cometh⁹⁰ and receives your precious and enlightening answer. And this shall be the peace, when [your answer] cometh into our land⁹¹ and comes into our possession. Long life to our Master, the great Rabbi forever, from whom nothing is concealed, who seeks good for his people and speaks peace to all his seed.⁹²

⁷⁷ See above, §18. ⁷⁸ Neh. 8:8. ⁷⁹ Eccles. 7:23. See above, §18. ⁸⁰ See above, §13. ⁸¹ See above, §14. ⁸² See above, §15. ⁸³ See above, §10. ⁸⁴ See above, §11. ⁸⁵ Esth. 9:26. ⁸⁶ Josh. 9:9. ⁸⁷ Dan. 10:21. ⁸⁸ Exod. 10:25. ⁸⁹ 1 Kings 1:20. ⁹⁰ Dan. 12:12. ⁹¹ Micah 5:4. ⁹² Esth. 10:3.

201 ידינו] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: יבינו; ראה לעיל, שורות 114, 116. 204 לשאול] בכת"י: מלשאול. תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

215 24 כבר שלחנו איגרות אחרות לפני רבינו ולא ידענו אם הגיעו
לידו. [47] ויש באגרת הזאת דברים שלא היו באחרות, והיו
באחרות דברים שאנו מסתפקי' אם יתכן בעיני מרינו להשיב
עליהן. והוא ענין אשר נמצא בספרי חכמי המזלות. וכן אמרו:
לעולם במולד אדם מקום הלבנה ברגע המולד היא המעלה
220 הצומחת ברגע רדת הטפה ברחם. והמעלה הצומחת ברגע
המולד שם היתה הלבנה ברגע הטפה. על כן, לו ידענו רגע
הטפה נוכל לדעת רגע המולד. ואם ידענו רגע המולד נוכל
לדעת מתי היה רגע הטפה. ואמרו חכמי' רובי הנולדים הם
בקרוב מתשעה חדשים: ומעמד הקצר רנ"ט, והאמצעי רע"ג,
225 והארוך רפ"ז, ופעמים רס"ו ופעמים ר"ף. [48] והרויחו
בחכמתם ונתנו פנים בכל זמן זמן. וכתבו דברים אחרי'
ארוכים שאין בנו כח להבין. וחכם אחד הוסיף מדעתו [49]
והראה שני דרכים בחכמת הכוכבים, [50] ואמר כי פעמים
שיצא הנולד קודם שבעת ימים מימי המעמד. והאריך בדברי
230 החכמה אשר פליאה דעת ממנו נשגבה לא נוכל לה.

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24 We have already sent other epistles to our Rabbi but do not know whether they reached him. [47] In the present epistle there are some points that were not in the others. And in the other [epistles] there were some issues that we are not sure our Master would respond to. One of them concerns a point found in the books of the astrologers. They said: In a man's nativity, the location of the Moon at the time of birth is always the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of the descent of the drop [of semen] into the womb. And the [degree of the] ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of birth is the place where the Moon was at the moment of the [descent of] the drop [into the womb]. Therefore, if we know the moment of the [descent of the] drop, we can know the moment of birth, and if we know the moment of birth we can know the moment of the [descent of the] drop. Some scholars said that most fetuses are [carried in the womb] approximately nine months: The short period [of pregnancy] is 259 [days], the medial [period] is 273 days, and the long [period] is 287 days, but sometimes 266 and sometimes 280 [days].⁹³ [48] And they expatiated [on the issue] in their wisdom and gave alternative explanations for each period [of pregnancy]. They also wrote long dissertations that we cannot understand. One scholar made his own contribution [49] and presented two approaches in the science of the stars; [50] he said that sometimes babies are born seven days before the [appropriate] period [of pregnancy]. He extended his wise statements, but such knowledge is too wonderful for us; too high, we cannot attain unto it.⁹⁴

220 והמעלה הצומחת] בכת"י: הצומחת; השלמתי עפ"י נוסח הראב"ע (ראה להלן, §24, הערה 48). 221 לן בכת"י: לא. תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 224 רע"ג] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: רג"ע; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הראב"ע; צ"ל רע"ג 273; ראה להלן, תרגום אנגלי, הערה 93; §24, הערה 48. 225 רס"ו] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: רפ"ו; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח הראב"ע; צ"ל רס"ו 266. ראה להלן, תרגום אנגלי, הערה 93; §24, הערה 48.

⁹³ All these periods are full weeks: 259 days = 37 weeks, 273 days = 39 weeks, 287 days = 41 weeks, 266 days = 38 weeks, and 280 days = 40 weeks. ⁹⁴ Ps. 139:6.

25 ויודיענו אדונינו אשר ממנו לא נכחד כל דבר אם יוכל חכם בחכמת החזיון [51] לבחור בעת היריון: שעה ידועה או חצי שעה או שליש שעה פנויה מכל נזק, תחלת יום או תחלת לילה, שהיא שעה שאדם יכול לעמוד בה שתהיה ראוי לה תחלת כל דבר. ויוכל לכוין שיבוא המולד בעת רצון. וטוב הדבר מאד אפי' לא יוכל לבחור אלא יום אחד בכל שנה ושנה לבני דורו למספר השנים הבאות עד שבעים שנה, או פחות או יתר, כפי אשר תשיג חכמתו, לחשבון הצריך לו לכל הזמנים הראויים למעמד הולד. והנה הורנו רבנו ז"ל להשמר מן הכוכב המזיק בשעת מולדו. [52]

26 ואם יתכן בעיני רבי' להשיב על זה, ישיב ויכתוב בכתב אחד בפני עצמו [53] בדבר אין ראוי למסור אלא לצנועים. ואם ישר בעיני רבי' מענה כן, ישלחנו מנאמן שיבוא לנאמן עד בואו למקום אחד ששמו מונטפשליר סמוך לעיר נרבונא ועיר מרשיליא. ואם יאבה השם למלאת תאותינו שנראה כתב מאד' יהי נכתב ונחתם לאות אמת בשם הרב ר' יהונתן מרבני ארצינו וחסידיה [54].

27 ואם בדבר שאלותינו תחת דברי פינו סכלות ואחרית דברינו כסילות והערתנו דברים לפני רבינו ולא דברנו כראוי לפניו,

233 תחלת לילה] בכת"י: תחלת; השלמתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 239 [להשמר] בכת"י: לא שמר. תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 239 מולדו] בכת"י: משלו. תיקנתי עפ"י הקשר הדברים. 243 מונטפשליר] בכת"י: מוטל, ואח"כ מקום פנוי; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס. 243 לעיר נרבונא] בכת"י: הסמוך לכפר עיר דרבונא; תיקנתי עפ"י נוסח מרקס.

25 May Our Master, from whom nothing is hidden, inform us whether a scholar in the science of observation [51] can choose the moment of conception—a certain hour, or half hour, or third of an hour, that is free of all harm, at the beginning of the day or the beginning of the night, that is, a time that can be reckoned as appropriate to begin any task. Thus, one could determine that birth occur at a propitious time. This may be very helpful even if he can select only one specific day in every year for those living in his generation, for the coming years up to a period of seventy years, more or less, as far as his lore may go, taking into account the required reckoning of times that are propitious for the period [of pregnancy] of the fetus. Indeed, our Rabbi of blessed memory taught us to guard ourselves against the baneful star at the hour of birth. [52]

26 If our Rabbi sees fit to respond regarding this, please write [it] in a separate letter, [53] for this matter should be communicated only to the chaste.⁹⁵ And if our Rabbi deems fit to answer in this way, may he send [the letter] from one trustworthy person to another⁹⁶ till it arrives at a place named Montpellier, which is close to the cities of Narbonne and Marseilles. And if God agrees to fulfill our wish and we receive a letter from our Master, then, to attest its truthfulness, let it be addressed and sealed with the name of Rabbi Jonathan, who is one of the rabbis and pious men of our country. [54]

27 If there is foolishness in our questions and the conclusion of our utterances is silliness, and we have burdened you with a verbose style and expressed ourselves in an inappropriate manner, may our Rabbi in his mercy forgo his honor. What our Rabbi sees fit to answer, may he answer all our questions with acceptable words, and words of truth written in proper⁹⁷ form, to enlighten us and gladden us. May he show

⁹⁵ B Qiddushin 71a et passim. ⁹⁶ J Megillah 12b and Genesis Rabbah 1:11. ⁹⁷ Eccles. 12:10.

250 הוא בחסדו ימחול על כבודו. על מה שיתכן בעיני מוריניו להשיב ישיב דברי חפץ וכתוב יושר דברי אמת על כל מה ששאלנו, להאיר עינינו ולשמח נפשינו. ויראה לנו דרך שלא נחוש לנסיונות חכמי המזלות. [55] כי יש בינינו מי שתגבר עליו מרה שחורה במחשב על אלו השאלות אשר שאלנו באגרת הזאת. ועל הכל ישלח דברו אדונינו לא יחסר דבר.

255 28 ואחרי אשר נמתיק בסוד דבריו הנעימים ונשמע מאתו האמת נסמוך עליו מן הכל ונקבל כהלכה למשה מסיני. ויהיו דבריו לששון ולשמחת לבב, ותהי לשון חכמינו מרפא לקיים עולם מלא. ועל מרינו גאונינו החיים והשלום.

260 29 ויודע לפני רבינו כי כתב אחד הובא בארצינו מענין ביאת המשיח, שיבוא במהרה בימינו. ונאמרו הדברים בשמך אשר באו אליך אנשים מארץ מרחק להגיד לך כי שם קם נביא בישראל ודבר על ביאת הגואל ואתה הודעת הדברים לבני פאס בכתב. [56] ולשון כתבך אשר שלחת אליהם נראה בגבולינו וקול התור נשמע בארצינו ולא ידענו אמיתת הדברים. ועתה רבינו גאונינו מחול על כבודך והודיענו העיקר לבשר טוב ולהשמיע שלום. וברכות יעטה מוריניו אדון שלום. בימיו תושע יהודה וישראל ישכון לבטח.

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x42

255 נמתיק] בכת"י ובנוסח מרקס: ימותיק; תיקנתי עפ"י תהלים נה:טו.

us the path so that we need not be concerned about the experiences of the astrologers. [55] For some of us are overcome by melancholy as a result of thinking about the questions that we have raised in the present letter. May our Master give his response to everything, omitting nothing.

28 And after we take sweet counsel⁹⁸ of his sweet words⁹⁹ and hear the truth from him, we will rely on him in everything and accept [his statements] as [if they were] the law given to Moses at Sinai.¹⁰⁰ His words will be happiness and hearty rejoicing, and the words of our sage will be the tonic that preserves the whole world.¹⁰¹ We wish our Gaon long life and peace.

29 Our Rabbi should know that a letter has reached our country about the coming of the Messiah, may he come speedily in our days. It was said, in your name, that some people from a distant country came to tell you that a prophet has arisen in Israel and spoken about the coming of the redeemer, and you informed the community of Fez of those things in writing. [56] The letter that you sent them has appeared in our region and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land,¹⁰² but we do not know whether there is truth to the report. And now, Our Rabbi, our Gaon, forgo your honor and let us know the gist of the message, heralding good tidings and announcing peace.¹⁰³ May our Teacher, the Master of Peace, be covered with blessings. And in his days shall Judea be saved and Israel shall dwell safely.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Ps. 55:15. ⁹⁹ Prov. 23:8. ¹⁰⁰ Genesis Rabbah 72:5 et passim. ¹⁰¹ B Beraḳot 59a et passim. ¹⁰² Cant. 2:12. ¹⁰³ Isa. 52:7 ¹⁰⁴ Jer. 23:6

Explanatory Notes

§ 1

[1] **Formerly in Israel etc.** The opening paragraph consists of a series of biblical extracts, in conformity with contemporaneous literary practice in epistles of this type.¹ In many other parts of the letter, too, biblical and nonbiblical phrases are used as building blocks with which the writers convey their message to Maimonides.

[2] **Moses, the distinguished scholar etc.** An unmistakable feature of §1 is the great esteem in which Maimonides was held by the writers of *Queries*. The same admiring attitude is evident throughout the epistle.² What accounts for this high opinion? The allusion in §1 to Maimonides' books as "his messengers" and "his jewels" suggests that the Provençal scholars were acquainted with all or most of Maimonides' great works. I. Shailat maintained that they had received the *Mishneh Torah*, notably those parts of *Avodah Zarah* denouncing astrology, before they wrote their letter.³ But this does not seem to be the case. Had they been familiar with any of Maimonides' works they would almost certainly have referred to it explicitly. Moreover, Maimonides himself, in his reply, assumes that neither his *Code* nor the *Guide of the Perplexed* (not yet translated into Hebrew) has reached them. He even corrects their statement about his "Letter to Yemen," which the Provençal scholars erroneously assumed to be directed to the Jews of Fez, and informs them of the fate of the false messiah in Yemen.⁴ More in keeping with the evidence of the sources is Marx's opinion that "we are compelled to conclude that it was fame that had reached them by rumor rather than his writings."⁵

§ 2

[3] **Mazzal.** The term, in the plural, appears in 2 Kings 23:5, where it seems to refer to the planets other than the Sun and the Moon.⁶ In B

Shabbat 156a, too, *mazzal* seems to mean a planet.⁷ *Mazzal* undoubtedly means "planet" in Genesis Rabbah 10:4, and this is how

¹ See S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, 1988), 5:422.

² See also §§19, 20, 22 et passim.

³ In Shailat's opinion (*Letters* 2, pp. 474–475), Maimonides' remark that the *Mishneh Torah* had not yet reached the Provençal scholars should be read as a reprimand: why do you, who have already read the section of my code dealing with 'avodah zarah in which I expressed my opinion about astrology, bother me again with questions about astrology? This, to say the least, is a very forced reading of Maimonides' letter.

⁴ Marx, "Correspondence," §3, p. 349; §8, p. 351; §27, pp. 356–357.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 325–326. If for "rumor" we read "widespread interchange of commercial and personal correspondence," then, in the light of the findings of modern Mediterranean studies, it is easy to understand how Maimonides' fame crossed the Mediterranean from one extreme to the other. See Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 1:11–12, 26, 162, 163.

⁶ Notice that in this verse the *mazzalot* are distinguished from the Sun and the Moon on the one hand and from the host of heaven, an expression that may indicate the fixed stars, on the other. For *mazzal* as a planet, see D. Shapira, "אין מזל לישראל: Celestial Race, The Jews," *Kabbalah* 5 (2000):111–127, esp. p. 126.

⁷ This talmudic passage mentions "the *mazzal* of the day" and "the *mazzal* of the hour" (מזל יום, מזל שעה), which are in all likelihood references to an astrological doctrine of Chaldean origin that assigns each of the planets to a day of the week and the hours of the day. See A. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie grecque* (Paris, 1899), pp. 477–486. For the later application of this doctrine in Arabic astrology, see Al-Bīrūnī, *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology*, ed. and trans. R. Ramsay Wright (London, 1934), pp. 237–238. Notice also that in B Shabbat 156a, Saturn is called *šabbetai* because it is the planet in charge of *šabbat*, the seventh day in the week. The discussion goes on to illustrate the general astrological influence of *mazzal* by pointing to the specific astrological characteristics of the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon, and then of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. Next, *mazzal* is ascribed the power to give

Maimonides understood the term in *Guide of the Perplexed* II, 10.⁸ Elsewhere in the talmudic corpus, however, *mazzal* has other senses: human fate as influenced by the stars (B Mo^ced Qatan 28a; see §6); a star or constellation, such as *Kimah* (B Rosh Hashanah 11b–12a); etc.⁹

A scrutiny of the uses of *mazzal* in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages suggests that its meaning gradually crystallized into the twelve zodiacal constellations or signs,¹⁰ when used in the plural, and as one of these twelve, when used in the singular. This process is already visible in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakot 32b) and in some midrashim (Genesis Rabbah 100:9). It is evident in the *Baraita de-Šemu³el* and the *Baraita de-Mazzalot* and dominant after the twelfth century, with the creation of a new Hebrew corpus of astronomical and astrological works.

In *Queries*, the term *mazzal* appears 28 times, in the singular and plural. Given its multivalent sense, I have opted for a contextual translation strategy. In some cases it has been integrated into terms like “astrologers” (חכמי המזלות) and “astrology” (חכמת המזלות), which are translations of well-known expressions coined by Abraham Ibn Ezra and borrowed by the Provençal scholars (§§6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 21, 24, and 27; see below, §7, n. 25). In other cases it is rendered by zodiacal constellation” (§§2, 4, 6, 7, and 14) or as “astrological fate” or “star” (§§2, 6, 10, 12, and 16). In the references to B Shabbat 156a I have stuck with the Hebrew term (§§2 and 6).

[4] **There is no mazzal for Israel.** This is a quotation from B Shabbat 156a, where we find an astrological discussion between R. Ḥanina and R. Joḥanan (ca. 180–ca. 279). I will summarize the main ideas of this dialogue, which was well known and implicitly referred to by both the Provençal scholars and their Jewish astrological sources. R. Ḥanina holds that *mazzal* gives wisdom and wealth (מזל מחכים מזל מעשיר). The all-encompassing power of astrological influence is fittingly illustrated by the statement that *even* Israel stands under the sway of *mazzal* (ויש

מזל לישראל). R. Joḥanan, the founder of the academy at Tiberias, tersely retorts that “there is no *mazzal* for Israel” (אין מזל לישראל), that is, Israel is immune to astrological influence. The question of why and how this exceptional status could come about remains open; consequently, the remainder of the talmudic discussion develops R. Joḥanan’s opinion. The fact that R. Ḥanina’s opinion is not amplified reveals the preferences of the talmudic editor.

Two main arguments are presented to support the opinion that “there is no *mazzal* for Israel.” The first, put forward by R. Joḥanan himself and by R. Judah, invokes the biblical past by adducing three biblical verses: (a) Jeremiah 10:2, from which the Talmud learns that while the Gentiles are dismayed by the heavenly constellations, Israel should not be; (b) Genesis 15:3–5, from which R. Judah concludes that Abraham could beget Isaac, despite his congenital barrenness, because he could overcome the control of the stars—proof that Israel is exempt from astrological influence; (c) Isaiah 41:2, which R. Judah reads as

wisdom and wealth (מזל מחכים מזל מעשיר): the first is probably a reference to the most common astrological characteristic of Mercury; the second, to a complex astrological interplay between several planets. For Mercury’s influence on human wisdom, see Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* III, 13 (Loeb edition, ed. and trans. F.E. Robbins [London, 1980], pp. 359–361). For the planetary influence on material fortune, see *Tetrabiblos* IV, 2 (ed. Robbins, pp. 373–377).

⁸ See *Le Guide des Egarés par Moïse Ben Maimoun dit Maïmonide*, publié pour la première fois dans l’original arabe par S. Munk, Réimpression photomécanique de l’édition 1856–1866 (Osnabrück, 1964), Vol. II, 2:10, Judeo-Arabic section, p. 21a.

⁹ For a comprehensive review of the uses of *mazzal*, see E. Ben-Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (New York and London, 1960), 4:2282–2285.

¹⁰ A zodiacal constellation is one of the twelve groups of stars of the zodiac, that is, the belt centered on the ecliptic. A zodiacal sign is one of the 30° arcs of the ecliptic. Each of the zodiacal signs corresponds to one of the zodiacal constellations.

referring to the astronomical phenomenon that led to the change in Abraham's astrological destiny: The planet Jupiter, which stood in the west and portended Abraham's barrenness, was relocated to the east by God, thereby shifting Abraham's astrological fate.

The second argument is advanced through three stories intended to support R. Joḥanan's opinion, although they contain little astrological material. The two first stories, told by Samuel (second–third centuries) and R. Aqiba (ca. 50–ca. 135), demonstrate that righteousness and good deeds can deliver one from a certain death foretold by the astrologers. The third story, related by R. Naḥman b. Isaac, tells how an astrological prediction that someone would become a thief came true, but only after he committed a moral lapse (not covering his head so that the fear of heaven would be on him). The message of all three stories is the same: Even though “there is no *mazzal* for Israel,” Jews are not automatically protected against the decrees of the stars; rather, astrological influence may be counteracted by good deeds, that is, by conduct that is morally impeccable according to rabbinic standards.¹¹

The Provençal scholars were in all likelihood also acquainted with the opinions of two twelfth-century Hebrew writers on astrology. Abraham Bar Ḥiyya (ca. 1065–ca. 1140), active in Catalonia and probably in Provence, twice expressed his views about the idea that “there is no *mazzal* for Israel.” In the introduction to a Jewish and universal astrological history, which constitutes the fifth chapter of his *Megillat ha-megalleh* (The revelator's scroll), Bar Ḥiyya recognized the role played by astrology in the collective fate of the Jewish nation. He maintained, however, that whereas each of the other nations has a specific zodiacal constellation and a specific planet that is in charge of it, the Jewish nation does not.¹² In his epistle to Rabbi Judah b. Barzilai of Barcelona, Bar Ḥiyya discussed the Talmudic explanation and added that the pious and the righteous among the Jews are endowed with the power to abrogate the decrees of the stars—an exclusively Jewish prerogative.¹³

Whenever he dealt with “there is no *mazzal* for Israel,” Abraham Ibn Ezra, too, always described the astrological status of Jews as privileged in comparison with that of other nations or religions. In one of his biblical commentaries, however, Ibn Ezra belittled the scope of this special astrological status by conditioning its realization on the unlikely situation that the *entire* Jewish nation observes God's commandments.¹⁴ Moreover, Ibn Ezra explained the Jews' prolonged exile as the result of a malign conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, presumably

¹¹ For discussions of this passage and of astrology in the talmudic period, see: M. Bar-Ilan, “Astronomy and Astrology among the Jews in Antiquity,” in A. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner, eds., *Supplement I to the Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (forthcoming); J. Charlesworth, “Jewish Interest in Astrology during the Hellenistic and Roman Period,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Part 2, Vol. 20 (Berlin, 1987), pp. 926–950, esp. pp. 931–932; A. Altmann, “Astrology,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971/72), 3:789–90; Lester J. Ness, *Astrology and Judaism in Late Antiquity* (Phd. Diss., Univ. of Miami, Oxford, Ohio, 1990), pp. 154–156; M. N. Sobel, “Iṣṭagninut,” *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem, 1960), 466–468 (Hebrew).

¹² It could not be otherwise, he affirmed, because all the stars and zodiacal constellations were created for the sake of Israel. Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer megilat ha-Megale von Abraham bar Chija*, published by A. Posnanski with introduction and notes by J. Guttman (Berlin, 1924), p. 115 (hereafter *Megillat ha-megalleh*).

¹³ To Bar Ḥiyya's mind, God behaves in different ways, depending on whether He wishes to annul some astrological threat to the Jewish nation or to the Gentile nations. Whereas in the latter case God manipulates and annuls the power of the stars that are responsible for the potential damage, He does not have to do so in the case of the Jewish nation, since no planet or zodiacal constellation is in charge of it. See Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, “Epistle addressed to Rabbi Judah b. Barzilai of Barcelona” (Hebrew), in *Festschrift Adolf Schwarz* (Berlin and Vienna, 1917), pp. 23–36, on p. 27.

¹⁴ See the long commentary on Exodus 33:21, in *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Torah*, ed. A. Weiser (Jerusalem, 1976), 2:218 (Hebrew).

in the sign of Aquarius.¹⁵ Consequently, in a passage of one of his astrological treatises referring to the astrological status of Christendom, Judaism, and Islam, Ibn Ezra endorsed the talmudic dictum—as long as the Jews cling to God and observe His commandments—while in the same breath expressing no doubt that “Aquarius rules over Israel.”¹⁶

This short account shows that whereas the Talmud adopts a personal approach, focusing attention on the extent to which individual Jews are subject to the stars and the extent to which they may avert their baneful influence, medieval thinkers interpreted the dictum that “there is no *mazzal* for Israel” to mean that the nation of Israel is collectively endowed with a favored astrological status. In *Queries*, the Provençal scholars refer only to the talmudic sources and disregard the medieval ones, although they were acquainted with at least some of them.

[5] **We have come upon the following responsum by Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai.** *Queries* includes only a fragment of the responsum, which was published in its entirety by A. Harkavy in 1887.¹⁷ The part of the responsum omitted includes quotations from B Shabbat 156a and B Mo^ced Qatan 28a, the two main Talmudic sources of *Queries* (§§2 and 6).¹⁸ The section included in *Queries* includes seminal ideas that were further expanded in Ibn Ezra’s introduction to his *Sefer ha-moladot* (see below, §3, n. 13).

[6] **The astrologers who gaze at the stars.** This compound term, which Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai used to refer to astrologers, combines elements deriving from two historical layers. The phrase “those who gaze at the stars” (החוזים בכוכבים), is borrowed from Isaiah 47:13; as far as I know, it was not used in the talmudic period to refer to astrologers. The Geonim’s responsum was probably responsible for its widespread use in the Middle Ages. Its use is especially noticeable in the fifth chapter of Abraham Bar Ḥiyya’s *Megillat ha-megalleh*.¹⁹

Most interesting is the first element, בעלי אצטגנינות, literally “the

practitioners of *ḥiṣṭagninut*, a term taken from the Babylonian Talmud, in which *ḥiṣṭagninin* and *ḥiṣṭagninut* appear multiple times. Their most plausible etymology is the Greek ὁ στέγανος, that is, *one that conceals* or *one that keeps in secret*.²⁰ *Ḥiṣṭagninin* is applied several times in the Babylonian Talmud to Pharaoh’s magicians, who tried to match Moses’ feats.²¹ In other context, *ḥiṣṭagninut* has a clear astrological meaning. In Shabbat 156b, the amora R. Judah invokes Genesis 15:3–5 to support R. Joḥanan opinion that Israel is immune from astrological influence (see above, §2, n. 4). According to R. Judah, Abraham examined his *ḥiṣṭagninut* (נסתכלתי באיצטגנינות שלי), that is, he determined his astrological fate by inspecting the stars, and concluded that he was not

¹⁵ Ibn Ezra expresses this view in several places, including the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot*, in a passage that, as will be show below, was known to the Provençal scholars. See *Sefer ha-moladot*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 1056 (hereafter *Moladot*), fol. 46b. On conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter, see especially K. Yamamoto and Ch. Burnett, eds. and trans., *Abū Ma^cshar on Historical Astrology, The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, (Leiden, 2000), 1:582–586.

¹⁶ Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Sefer ha-^colam* (second version), Rome, Vatican MS Ebr. 477, fol. 88b.

¹⁷ *Zichron la-rishonim we-gam la-^caharonim*, Responsa of the Geonim Rav Sherira and Rav Hai and Rav Isaac Alfasi, ed. A. Harkavy (Berlin, 1887), pp. 206–207 (hereafter *Responsa*).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 206: ר' חנינא אמר מול חכמים מול מעשיר ויש מול לישראל או משום חכמה ועושר (שבת קנו"א). ואו נמי להא דאמר רבא חיי מזוני ובני לא מזכו ולא בעברין טבין תליא מילתא אלא במזלא תליא מילתא (מועד קטן כח ע"א) לא קשיא לן אבל לראשון רוב רבנן דאין מול לישראל (שבת קנו ע"א).

¹⁹ *Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 4, 12, 13, 120, 144, 149, 154.

²⁰ Jacob Levy, “Istagninin,” in *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Darmstadt, 1963), 1:118.

²¹ See B Beraḳot 4a, Sanhedrin 101b, Sotah 12a, 13a, 36b.

destined to beget a child. If Abraham nonetheless fathered Isaac, it was, in R. Judah's view, because God ordained that he be freed from his *ʾiṣṭagninut* (צא מאיצטגנינות שלך); that is, Abraham overcame the control of the stars.²²

Maimonides employed both of these terms—"those who gaze at the stars" and "the astrologers"—in his *Letter on Astrology*, in all likelihood as a witty riposte to the Geonim's earlier use of the same expressions.²³

[7] **Two types.** Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai divide astrologers into two groups, one endorsing a "hard" and the other a "soft" version of astrology. Their responsum explains the talmudic dictum "there is no *mazzal* for Israel" and the aforementioned discussion in B Shabbat 156b (see above, §2, n. 4).²⁴ The responsum presents R. Ḥanina's hard version of astrology, according to which "*mazzal* gives wisdom and wealth," as meaning that astrologers of the first group "attribute everything to the stars." The responsum construes the view ascribed to Samuel and R. Aqiva, that astrological influence may be counteracted by good deeds, as asserting that the second group of astrologers maintain that "man by means of his wisdom can do things that are not predetermined by the stars."

The two Geonim, however, expanded considerably on this basically dualistic approach, showing that they read the talmudic text in the light of several key elements of the new Arabo-Hellenistic science. The Jewish community of Baghdad in the time of Sherira Gaon (d. 1006) and Hai Gaon (d. 1038) was of considerable size and intellectual activity, excelling in astronomy, medicine, and not least in astrology.²⁵ In the following notes I discuss some of these elements, which became cardinal elements of the Provençal scholars' epistle.

[8] **A man's movements and even his inner thoughts depend on the stars.** Is the influence of the stars limited to the material composition of the human body, or does it extend to the spiritual realm as well, de-

termining a person's desires and choices? Abraham Ibn Ezra, in the introduction to his *Sefer ha-še'elot*, describes the "state of the art" in Islamic civilization by distinguishing "two great schools of thought." The first, represented by "Hermes, Ptolemy, and many of the ancients with them," holds "that everything that occurs to the bodies of the lower world is caused by the movements of the bodies of the upper world"; the second, represented by Dorotheus of Sidon, the scholars of India, Persia, and Egypt, and certain astrologers whom the author considers close to him, takes the view that "since the stars indicate how the physical nature of the body is altered, we can know thoughts and questions."²⁶ When describing the hard version of the talmudic sages, the two Geonim similarly state that its upholders take not only "a man's movements" but also "his inner thoughts" to depend on the stars.

²² The term *ʾiṣṭagninut*, with the same meaning of "astrological prognostication," is also used in the Babylonian Talmud: Nedarim 32a, Shabbat 156a, Yoma 28b, Bava Batra 16b.

²³ Marx, "Correspondence," pp. 349, 350. For Maimonides' use of the term *ʾiṣṭagninin*, see Sela, "Fuzzy Borders," pp. 67–80.

²⁴ *Responsa*, pp. 206–207.

²⁵ J. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam* (Leiden, 1986), pp. 79–84; B.R. Goldstein, "Astronomy and the Jewish Community in Early Islam," *Aleph* 1 (2001):17–57.

²⁶ See below, §15, n. 43. The Provençal scholars were familiar with the introduction to Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-še'elot*, as will be shown below. A felicitous though late expression of these positions may be found in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 72. For the Galenic source of *Guide* III, 12, where Maimonides discusses the sources of evil, notably Galen's *That the Powers of the Soul Follow Upon the Temperament of the Body*, see G. Freudenthal, "Four Implicit Quotations of Philosophical Sources in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Zutot* 2 (2002):114–125.

[9] **These [astrologers] do not acknowledge the Holy one, blessed be He.** The reception of astrology in Islamic civilization provoked some resistance. One of the most effective ways to denigrate astrology was to depict its followers as freethinkers and unbelievers. This can be observed in public debates on the validity and merits of astrology, in which leading educated figures of tenth-century Baghdad participated,²⁷ and in manifestos against astrology written by outstanding Muslim intellectuals such as Avicenna.²⁸ The statement by the two Geonim that those who support the hard version include some who “do not acknowledge the Holy one, blessed be He, and have nothing to do with our concerns,” echoes such criticism.

[10] **Wisdom.** The soft version of astrology holds that man can be delivered from his astrological fate by drawing on “wisdom.” Subsequently, Sherira Gaon and Hai Gaon also refer to the “power” of the “soul,” whose “substance” (see below, §2, n. 11) is “above the stars and zodiacal constellations.” By “wisdom” they probably mean the rational and scientific approach, which is later exemplified by the fact that “man can drink cold beverages in order to cool himself” (see below, §2, n. 12). These concepts were probably based on ideas about the soul that were developed and circulated in the cultural milieu of the Geonim, most notably by Saadia Gaon (882–942), who uses the term “power” to qualify the “wise soul” or rational soul in the context of the doctrine of the tripartite soul.²⁹

[11] **Substance.** To express the notion that the wise or rational human soul is a “substance,” the two Geonim used the Arabic philosophic term *jauhar* (גוהר), which is derived from Persian *gawhar*. *Jauhar* is the common Arabic term for the Greek *ousia*, one of the fundamental terms of Aristotelian philosophy, and thus a basic and widely used philosophical term.³⁰

[12] **Man can drink cold beverages in order to cool himself.** The Hippocratic-Galenic theory maintained that health and illness were determined by the mixture and proportion of the four humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile) in the body.³¹ Human health depended on preserving the natural equilibrium of the “temperament,” that is, the mixture of the four humors. Illness was considered to be a violation of this equilibrium, i.e., the excess of one of the humors, possibly due to the influence of a planet. Consequently, the act of healing involved restoring the “temperament” to its natural equilibrium.

²⁷ See, for example, the discussion of astrology that took place in Baghdad in the scholarly circle of Abū Sulaymān (c. 912–c. 985), fully reported in Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, pp. 150–162.

²⁸ A.F. Mehren, “Vues d’Avicenne sur l’astrologie et sur le rapport de la responsabilité humaine avec le destin,” *Le Muséeon* 3 (1884):383–403, on pp. 395–396. For Al-Fārābī’s anti-astrological stance, see Thérèse-Anne Druart, “Astronomie et astrologie selon Farabi,” *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 20 (1978):43–47; idem, “Le second traité de Farabi sur la validité des affirmations basées sur la position des étoiles,” *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 21 (1979): 47–51.

²⁹ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. from the Arabic and the Hebrew by Samuel Rosenblatt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 241–245; idem, *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job by Saadiyah ben Joseph al-Fayyūmī*, translated from the Arabic with a philosophic commentary by L. E. Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 154–155. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 69a, 69d, 79d; Aristotle, *De anima* 413a, 413b, 414a, 414b. See also H.A. Davidson, “Saadia’s List of Theories of the Soul,” pp. 75–94 in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

³⁰ See *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Leiden, 1965), s.v. *djawhar* (pp. 494–495).

³¹ For Galen’s physiology, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Greek Science after Aristotle* (New York and London, 1973), pp. 138–141.

Astrologers, for their part, held that certain planets were in charge of certain humors; Saturn, for example, was in charge of the black bile and Mars of yellow bile.³² Since the excessive action of a planet in charge of one of the humors could modify the equilibrium within the body, man could counter their action by, for example, cooling a body that had been unduly heated. The statement by the two Geonim, to the effect that “when the star provokes fever at a certain time ... man can drink cold beverages in order to cool himself,” is grounded not only in this Galenic naturalistic theory but also espouses the therapeutic claims of the astrologers.

§ 3

[13] **Ill with fever ... temperament of his body.** This is an almost verbatim quotation from the introduction to the first version of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot* (Book of nativities). This is a treatise concerned with genethliological astrology, whose fundamental tenet is that an individual’s destiny is predetermined by the configuration of the stars at the instant of birth. It was composed, as a major component of Ibn Ezra’s astrological encyclopedia, in 1148, in the city of Béziers in Provence.³³ The passage from which the Provençal scholars quote runs as follows:

והדרך הח' מפאת כח הנשמה וכחה היא החכמה. כי אם היה הנולד חכם
בחכמת המזלות וראה בתקופת שנתו כי יקרנו חלי מחום בזמן ידוע בהכנס
מאדים אל מעלות הצומחת, והנה אם ישמר הוא קודם בא החלי מכל
מאכל חם וישתה משקיות לקרר גופו, הנה תתישר תולדת גופו בהכנס
מאדים במעלתו הצומחת. וככה הבוטח בשם בכל לבו השם יסבב לו סבות
ולו נתקנו עלילות להצילנו מכל נזק במולד. ע"כ אין ספק כי הצדיק יותר
שמור מהמשכיל בדיני המזלות כי פעמים ישתבשו עליו הדינין, כדרך
שאמר הכתוב וקוסמים יהולל (ישעיהו מד: כה) והנה אשרי מי שלבו תמים
עם אלהיו.³⁴

Translation: The eighth rule is concerned with the power of the soul, whose power is wisdom. Consider the case of a scholar in the science of the zodiacal signs who observes in [the horoscope of] his anniversary nativity³⁵ that he is bound to come down with fever at a certain time when Mars enters in the degrees of the ascending zodiacal sign.³⁶ If he takes precautions before the illness comes, abstaining from any hot food and drinking beverages in order to cool his body, then he will maintain a balance in the temperament of his body when Mars enters the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign. Likewise, he who trusts God with all his heart, God—“by Him actions are weighed” (1 Sam. 2:3)—will bring about the proper causes on his behalf to save him from any harm [prognosticated] in his nativity. Hence there is no doubt that the righteous person is better protected against the judgments coming from the stars than the scholar is, because the scholar’s acuteness of judgment will sometimes be

³² See, for example, *Abū Maʿshar, The Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology, together with the Medieval Latin translation of Adelard of Bath*, ed. and trans. Ch. Burnett, K. Yamamoto, and M. Yano (Leiden, 1994), pp. 61–63; *Al-Bīrūnī, Art of Astrology*, p. 247.

³³ For Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot* and the place of this astrological treatise in his astrological encyclopedia, see S. Sela, “Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Scientific Corpus: Basic Constituents and General Characterization,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2001):91–149, esp. pp. 123–126.

³⁴ *Moladot*, fols. 46b–47a.

³⁵ This is a horoscope cast on a person’s birthday each year and thought to have special bearing on the particular human affairs of the current year.

³⁶ That is, when Mars, in its motion, reaches the point on the ecliptic that rose above the eastern horizon at the time when the horoscope of the anniversary nativity was cast. For the ascending zodiacal sign, see below, n. 66.

faulty, as Scripture says (Isa. 44:25), “and makes diviners mad.” See how fortunate is he whose heart is wholly with his God.

The Provençal scholars used the quote from Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot* to clarify and expand upon the statement by the two Geonim that “man can drink cold beverages in order to cool himself.” Moreover, they chose to embed this passage in *Queries* because they knew that Ibn Ezra wrote the entire eighth rule from the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* as a commentary on and expansion of the second part of the responsum by Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai.³⁷ Indeed, they allude to this fact in §3, where they wrote that “there are those who speak wisely about this matter (ויש מתחכמים בדבר)³⁸ and maintain that the sayings of the Geonim, their memory for a blessing, refer only to a person. ...” The eighth rule, following in the footsteps of Rabbi Sherira and Rabbi Hai, propounds that protection from the stars is indeed attainable and divides this soft version of astrology into two alternative ways of conduct: One path is to follow a rational and active approach relying on a scientific methodology; the other derives from a religious and passive stance and consists in entrusting one’s fate exclusively to God. Ibn Ezra attributes these alternatives to “a scholar in the science of the zodiacal signs,” that is, an astrologer, who counteracts the potential harmful physical effects of the stars by applying prophylactic medical measures, essentially the same that appear in the responsum by the two Geonim, and to “the righteous person,” the pious believer, who is saved by God’s intervention from the harm preordained by his personal horoscope.³⁹

Let us comment briefly on the passage from Ibn Ezra. He emphasizes that the prevention of disease, seen as a particular case of protection against the hurts of the stars, may be obtained by maintaining the “temperament” in its natural equilibrium, before it can be disrupted by the excessive influence of a planet on one of the humors. Assuming that Mars, for example, causes illness by producing an excess

of yellow bile (the humor under its sway), and knowing that the two main natural qualities of Mars are hot and dry, a person can preserve his health by abstaining from eating hot foods and by drinking suitable beverages “to cool his body.” The timing, too, is determined by astrological considerations. By “he will maintain a balance in the natural setting of his body when Mars enters the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign,” Ibn Ezra means that the neutralizing measures should be taken just when Mars’ harmful influence is about to come into effect—a time predicted by the horoscope. Although the Provençal scholars’ quotation preserves the essential idea they read in *Sefer ha-moladot*, it omits Ibn Ezra’s reference to the astrological considerations of the timing of the prophylactic measures and reduces Ibn Ezra’s precise

³⁷ On the close relationship between the eighth rule in the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* and the responsum of the two geonim, see S. Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 172–174.

³⁸ The Hebrew word מתחכמים – derived from the root *h-k-m* – whose basic meaning is associated with wisdom, provides an elliptical reference to the author of the following sentence, Abraham Ibn Ezra, as well as to astrologers, who throughout the letter are called *hakamim* and *hakmei ha-mazzalot*, that is, the scholars engaged in *hokmat ha-mazzalot* or the science of the zodiacal signs. The Hebrew word מתחכמים allows also for an ironic meaning, namely, “pretend to be wise.” In the translation, however, I have opted for the more neutral expression “those who speak wisely.”

³⁹ The following points of contact between the second part of the responsum by the two Geonim and the eighth rule in the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* should be noted: (a) where the responsum refers to “wisdom,” “the human soul,” or “the power of the soul,” the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* refers to “the power of the wise soul”; (b) in both cases, the wisdom of the human soul represents the main agent for averting the decrees of the stars, exemplified by two alternative paths. For a description and analysis of the eighth rule, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 172–191.

reference to “Mars in the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign” to a general reference to “the configuration of the stars of his nativity.”

[14] **The temperament of his body.** Hebrew: תולדות גופו. When quoting from the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* the authors of *Queries* naturally appropriated Ibn Ezra’s new astrological terminology. Here the Hebrew word *toledet* is a neologism that illustrates Ibn Ezra’s approach to the creation of scientific nomenclature. He holds that translators need not always coin new words to convey Arabic technical words into Hebrew. Instead, the biblical text can provide words he believed were already endowed with that scientific meaning. Thus, Ibn Ezra took the word *toledet* from Genesis 2:4 and defined it in his long commentary on Exodus 23:25 as “the power (*koah*) preserving the body that man receives from the heavens.”⁴⁰ The term thus has the general meaning of “nature”; Ibn Ezra employed it in a number of derived senses. The quotation in the letter highlights one of the most widespread uses of *toledet*, to convey the Galenic notion of “temperament.”⁴¹ The word is employed four more times in *Queries* with the same meaning (see §5 and §15).

[15] **Death on a certain day because of the configuration of the stars of his nativity.** See below, §5, n. 19.

§ 4

[16] **The decrees of the stars.** Hebrew: גזרות הכוכבים. The Provençal scholars probably took this medieval coinage from the astrological writings of Abraham Bar Ḥiyya.⁴² Although the noun *gezerot*, in the plural, or *gezerah*, in the singular, denoting astrological influence, is used frequently in Ibn Ezra’s biblical exegesis, it appears there without the qualification *ha-kokavim* (the stars).⁴³ The authors of *Queries* used various expressions formed from the root *g-z-r*: e.g., גזרות הכוכבים והמזלות (the decrees of the stars and of the zodiacal constellations), גזרות

מערכות הכוכבים והמזלות (the decrees of the configurations of the stars and of the zodiacal constellations),⁴⁴ or simply גזרות, in the plural, or גזרה, in the singular,⁴⁵ and the verbal form נגזר (decreed).⁴⁶ From *Queries* the term *gezerot ha-kokavim* passed to Maimonides, who employed it three times with the same astrological meaning in his reply.⁴⁷ See also, below, §5, n. 20, on the related concept of “judgments of the stars” (*mišpetei ha-kokavim*).

[17] **This is a futile prayer.** The Provençal scholars formulate their main misgiving about astrology in its hard version—the belief that the course of events in the world is entirely predetermined since creation induces people to think that prayer is futile. Indeed, opponents of astrology often pointed out that belief in astrological determinism threatens to subvert all social order. How much the authors of *Queries* were troubled by such thoughts may be appreciated by the fact that they reiterated similar ideas in §6, where we read that the astrologers “destroy the foundations of faith by positing astrology as an immovable

⁴⁰ See Ibn Ezra’s long commentary on Exodus 23:25 (ed. Weiser, 2:153–154).

⁴¹ For the uses and meanings of the word *toledet* in Ibn Ezra’s work, and especially to denote the notion of temperament, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 130–137.

⁴² Either from his “Epistle addressed to Rabbi Judah,” pp. 27, 30, or from the fifth chapter of *Megillat ha-megalleh*, p. 112.

⁴³ See the fragmentary (long) commentary on Genesis 1:1 (ed. Weiser, 1:158); commentary on Isaiah 24:18; long commentary on Exodus 3:8, 33:21, (ed. Weiser, 2:23, 218); commentary on Psalms 76:9.

⁴⁴ See §4.

⁴⁵ See §§17 and 21.

⁴⁶ See §§3, 5, and 13.

⁴⁷ Marx, “Correspondence,” pp. 351, 356.

peg.” A rhetorically striking feature of §6 is that they identify the antagonism between astrology and religious belief in the Talmud. B Mo^ced Qatan 28a—“length of life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but rather on astrological fate”—supports the hard version of astrology (see below, §6, n. 24). On the other hand, Shabbat 156a holds that “there is no *mazzal* for Israel” (see above, §2, n. 4).

§5

[18] **Their aspects.** Hebrew: מַבְטָם. The reference is to the *astrological aspects*, that is, the angular relationships between planets, zodiacal signs, and other components that play a key astrological function in the horoscope. The five astrological aspects usually posited by astrologers are classified according to the difference of longitude of two planets or celestial entities: (a) trine, 120°; (b) opposition, 180°; (c) quartile, 90°; (d) sextile, 60°; and (e) conjunction, 0°. The trine and sextile aspects are considered harmonious or favorable; opposition and quartile are considered disharmonious or inauspicious.⁴⁸ The Hebrew *mabbat* was used with this technical meaning by Abraham Bar Ḥiyya and Abraham Ibn Ezra.⁴⁹

[19] **Death.** The Provençal scholars express great concern about death as a result of the decrees of the stars. Two types of death are distinguished: (a) The death of persons who are physically weak from birth and whose natural makeup does not allow them a long life. This type of death is acceptable and even natural in the eyes of the Provençal scholars, who express this idea by quoting Psalms 88:11. (b) Death ordained by the stars that comes unexpectedly to an individual born with a strong natural constitution. The letter writers accept that divine intervention or human sins may cause such a sudden and unnatural death, but quote Job 32:18 to express the idea that such a death resulting from “the judgments of the stars” is totally unacceptable. Moreover, the Provençal scholars view the astrologers’ pretense that

they can foretell such a death as ruinous to the foundations of faith. They seem to have been thrown into considerable perplexity by the discussion of death in B Mo(ed Qatan 28a (see below, §6, n. 24) and in Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot* (see below, §8, n. 28).

[20] **The judgments of the stars.** Hebrew: משפטי הכוכבים. The term *mišpaṭim* in the astrological sense was coined by Abraham Ibn Ezra and occurs often throughout his work.⁵⁰ It designates both the effects of astrological influence and the rules by which the astrologer can determine this influence. The expression *mišpeṭei ha-kokavim*, which is a calque of the Arabic *aḥkām al-nujūm*, appears three times in *Queries* (§§5, 14, and 17)—one of the first occurrences of the term and a clear sign of the direct influence of Ibn Ezra.⁵¹

§6

[21] **Science of the zodiacal signs.** See below, §7, n. 25.

[22] **Science of the zodiacal signs and ... medical science.** Here as-

⁴⁸ For a general explanation of the astrological aspects, see Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* I, 13 (ed. Robbins, pp. 73–4); Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie grecque*, pp. 165–179; C. A. Nallino, “Astrology,” *First Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Leiden, 1987), p. 495.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., *Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 122, 124, 129, 131, 134, 136, 140 et passim; *Moladot*, fols. 50a, 52b, 53a, 54a, 58b et passim.

⁵⁰ For Ibn Ezra’s role in the creation of this Hebrew astrological neologism, see S. Sela, “El papel de Abraham Ibn Ezra en la divulgación de los ‘juicios’ de la astrología en la lengua hebrea y latina,” *Sefarad* 59 (1999):159–194.

⁵¹ Notice that although the term *mišpaṭim* occurs in Ibn Ezra’s work in a variety of combinations, notably in the expression *mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot* (lit. the judgements of the zodiacal signs), he did not use the expression *mišpeṭei ha-kokavim*, which appears in *Queries*.

trology is criticized and compared with the other sciences in general and with medical science in particular.⁵² Whereas medicine is beneficial,⁵³ astrology is futile and disquieting. At the same time, the astrologers' claim that they can foretell unnatural and premature death is construed as implying an astrological determinism that threatens to destroy the foundations of faith and annul the effect of prayers. The terminology used in this comparison betrays the implicit presence of Abraham Ibn Ezra, who coined and frequently employed the term *ḥokmat ha-mazzalot*, literally, science of the zodiacal signs (see below, §7, n. 25), and also used the term *ḥokmat ha-refu'ot*.

[23] **Those scholars destroy the foundations of faith.** See above, §4, n. 17.

[24] **Length of life, children, and sustenance depend not on merit but on astrological fate** (B Mo^c ed Qatan 28a). This talmudic dictum is cited in many discussions on astrology, including the responsum by Sherira Gaon and Hai Gaon,⁵⁴ Abraham Bar Ḥiyya's astrological history, and Abraham Ibn Ezra's biblical commentaries.⁵⁵ It is quoted here because the talmudic discussion poses two questions about the facts of death that are highly reminiscent of the discussion about death in §5: (a) Why does one person succumb to a sudden death and another dies after a short or long illness? (b) Why does one person die before he is fifty, another at sixty, and still another at seventy or eighty or more? Rava, one of the participants in the talmudic discussion, states that "length of life, children, and sustenance depend not on merit but on astrological fate" and adduces the example of two Sages: Although both were able to bring rain by their prayers, R. Ḥisda reached the age of ninety-two, while Rabbah died at forty. The fact that the hard version of astrology is propounded in an authoritative Jewish text perplexed the Provençal scholars. They sought to alleviate it by referring to two alternative Jewish texts: unspecified passages in the Torah, the Prophets, and the

Hagiographa, and, again, the talmudic dictum that "there is no *mazzal* for Israel" (see above, §2, n. 4).

§7

[25] **The astrologers.** Hebrew: חכמי המזלות. The term *ḥakmei ha-mazzalot*—that is, the scholars engaged in the "science of the zodiacal signs" (*ḥokmat ha-mazzalot*)—was a new coinage by Abraham Ibn Ezra which he employed to refer predominantly to astrologers, but also to astronomers, mathematicians, and calendarists.⁵⁶ The Provençal scholars employ it no fewer than nine times to refer to astrologers and describe some important features of their art (§§6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 21, 24, and 27). Elsewhere the single word *ḥakamim* 'scholars' does duty for *ḥakmei ha-mazzalot* (§§6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 24).

⁵² Another medieval tradition highlights the cooperation between astrology and medicine. See F. Klein-Franke, *Iatromathematics in Islam, A Study on Yuhanna Ibn as-Salt's Book on Astrological Medicine* (New York, 1984), pp. 19–69. Similar comparisons of medicine and astrology, preferring, respectively, the former and the latter, can be found in the work of Avicenna, who was a staunch opponent of astrology (see Mehren, "Vues d'Avicenne sur l'astrologie," pp. 397–398) and in the work of Abū Ma^c shar, probably the most influential medieval Arabic astrologer (see Abū Ma^c šar al-Balḥi [Albumasar], *Kitāb al-madhal al-kabīr ila 'ilm aḥkām al-nujūm, Liber Introductorii Maioris as Scientiam Judiciorum Astrorum*, ed. Richard Lemay [Naples, 1996], 5:5–14.).

⁵³ The utility of prophylactic measures, such as restoring the temperament to its natural equilibrium, is acknowledged in *Queries* (§§2–3). Natural death as a consequence of a weak constitution, that is, death as explained by medical science, is also accepted (§5).

⁵⁴ *Responsa*, p. 206: "ואו נמי להא דאמי רבא: חיי מווני ובני לא בזכו ולא בעברין טבין תליא מילתא אלא במזל תליא מילתא."

⁵⁵ See *Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 111, 115; Ibn Ezra's commentary on Eccles. 2:21 and long commentary on Exod. 20:13; 32:32 (ed. Weiser, 2:139, 211).

⁵⁶ For the multiple uses of the expression *ḥokmat ha-mazzalot* in Ibn Ezra's work, see Sela, "Fuzzy Borders," pp. 84–86.

[26] **The books of the scholars.** This is the first in a series of references to “the books of the scholars” or to “the books of the scholars engaged in the science of the zodiacal signs” (§§7, 10, 11, and 24). It is safe to say that all of them refer to Ibn Ezra’s astrological treatises (see below, §10, n. 31; §11, n. 34; §24, n. 48). In the present instance, two considerations confirm this assertion. First, he coined the expression “configuration of a star” (מערכת כוכב), not found before the twelfth century, and used it throughout his work, especially in the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot*.⁵⁷ Second, in §8 the Provençal scholars give some details they found in the “books of the scholars” mentioned in §7, and *all* of these are verbatim quotations from Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot* (see below, §8, n. 28). The plural (“the books of the *scholars*”) may be explained by the fact that even though the writers of *Queries* drew on the astrological books of a single author, viz. Ibn Ezra, in his treatises the latter usually referred to the astrological works of a long list of earlier astrologers.⁵⁸

[27] **Others make explicit etc.** See below, §11, n. 34.

§ 8

[28] **A man will die ... and other calamities.** This paragraph consists of a series of brief statements describing various calamities that can befall a man and which, according to the astrologers, are ordained by the stars. All of these statements are quotations (most of them verbatim) from Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot*. In what follows I quote in full the passages in *Sefer ha-moladot* that are excerpted in §8. The quoted words are underlined:

אמר חנוך: אם היה השליט על המות נגה או ככב חמה ... כי אם היו
במזלות המומים ימות מחלאים משונים.⁵⁹

Enoch [Hermes] said: If Venus or Mercury is the ruler of

death⁶⁰ ... and if they are in the maimed zodiacal signs,⁶¹ then
[a man] will die of unnatural sicknesses.

ואם היה מאדים ממונה ושליט על המות ... ואם [היה ב]מזלות שהם
על צורת בן אדם ימות מיד לסטים.⁶²

⁵⁷ See long commentary on Daniel 2:2; commentary on Job 10:22; long commentary on Exod. 6:3, 8:6, 23:25, 33:21 (ed. Weiser, 2:47, 55, 164, 218); commentary on Ps. 27:5, 75:7; *Sefer ha-miḥḥarim* (second version), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 1058, fol. 12b; *Sefer Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 1058, fol. 16b; *Sefer ha-še’elot* (first version), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 1056 (hereafter *Še’elot A*), fol. 62b; *Moladot*, fol. 46b. It was also used by later authors such as Gersonides. In this regard, see Gersonides’ commentaries on 2 Sam. 23:7; 2 Kings 19:15, Prov. 3:1; Job 1:1, 3:26, 10:22, 19:29.

⁵⁸ See examples referring to Hermes, Masha’allah, Ptolemy, and Sahal the Israelite in the notes to §8.

⁵⁹ *Moladot*, fol. 57a.

⁶⁰ A certain planet is said to be the “ruler of death” (*šaliṭ ‘al ha-mawet*) if, after a calculation involving a comparison with the other planets, it turns out to possess a maximum of “powers” (*koḥot*) in one of the “places of death” (*meqomot ha-mawet*). For example, a planet is assigned five “powers” if, besides being located in one of the places of death, it is located in its own planetary house or domicile as well (see below, n. 74). For the special “scale of powers” that underlies this comparative calculation, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, p. 252 n. 60; Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 306–308. According to *Moladot*, fol. 57a, the “places of death” that influence the time and type of death are the eighth horoscopic house, the place of the planet that is the lord of this house, the lot of death (the place between the Moon and the beginning of the eighth horoscopic house), and the place of the Moon.

⁶¹ Aries, Taurus, Cancer, Scorpio, Capricorn, and Pisces. See *Moladot*, fol. 55a; Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 212.

⁶² *Moladot*, fol. 57a.

And if Mars is in charge and the ruler of death ... and it [Mars] is in one of the zodiacal signs that have human shape,⁶³ then he [the newborn] will die at the hands of robbers.

בית י"ב: הסתכל אם היה המזל הצומח או ככב במזל הצומח נותן הכח לשבתי והוא בבית הד' יורה כי הנולד יעמוד בבית הסוהר.⁶⁴

The twelfth [horoscopic] house:⁶⁵ Look—if the ascending zodiacal sign⁶⁶ or the star that is in the ascending zodiacal sign gives its power⁶⁷ to Saturn, and if it [Saturn] is in the fourth [horoscopic] house,⁶⁸ it indicates that the newborn will be imprisoned.

ואם השמש שלטת על המות והיא בבית הז' או בו' ימות עם אנשים רבים מיתה משונה.⁶⁹

If the Sun is the ruler of death and it is in the seventh or in the sixth [horoscopic] house,⁷⁰ then [the newborn] will die an unnatural death together with many others.

וכלל אמר [מאשא אלה] ... ואם היה זה המזיק מזרחי מהשמש יהיה בו מום קבוע.⁷¹

[Masha'allah] stated this rule: ... And if the maleficent [planet]⁷² is to the east of the Sun, [the newborn] will suffer from a permanent deformity.

ואם היה [הכוכב] מהמזיקים ... ואם איננו בבית שלטונו יוקח ממונו.⁷³

If this [planet] is one of the maleficent ... and if it is not in the house where it exercises rulership,⁷⁴ then his wealth will be taken from him.

⁶³ Gemini, Virgo, Libra, and Sagittarius. See *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fol. 14b; Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 212–213.

⁶⁴ *Moladot*, fol. 59a.

⁶⁵ According to Ibn Ezra in *Rešit ḥoḳmah*, the twelfth horoscopic house indicates “grief, poverty, envy, hatred, fear, trickery, and grudge-bearing, as well as the prison-house, captivity, all sorts of disgrace and plagues, and the animals that men ride.” For the Hebrew text of Ibn Ezra’s *Rešit ḥoḳmah*, see *The Beginning of Wisdom, An Astrological Treatise by Abraham Ibn Ezra*, ed. Raphael Levy and Francisco Cantera (Baltimore, 1939), ch. 3, p. xli.

⁶⁶ This is the zodiacal constellation that rises above the eastern horizon at a certain significant time, usually the time of birth or the start of some important event, and serves as a fundamental parameter for casting the horoscope.

⁶⁷ “Giving power” (*ṭet ha-koah*) is one of the thirty situations referred to in the seventh chapter of *Rešit ḥoḳmah* (ibid., ch. 7, pp. lvi–lxii, esp. p. lix). These situations describe the interactive positions and circumstances in which one planet exerts influence on another.

⁶⁸ The fourth horoscopic house indicates “the father, lands, houses, fields, cities, buildings, hidden treasures, and everything that is concealed” (ibid., ch. 3, p. xli).

⁶⁹ *Moladot*, fol. 57a.

⁷⁰ The sixth horoscopic house indicates “any disease that is chronic and like an accident, slaves, female slaves, small cattle, prison, fraud, and gossip” (*Rešit ḥoḳmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xlii]). For the seventh house, see below, n. 100.

⁷¹ *Moladot*, fol. 55b.

⁷² Saturn or Mars. See *Tetrabiblos* I, 5 (ed. Robbins, p. 39); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 232–233.

⁷³ *Moladot*, fol. 51b.

⁷⁴ A planet that is located in a certain horoscopic house is said to exercise rulership over it if this horoscopic house overlaps any of the zodiacal signs that are considered to be the planet’s house or domicile. According to this doctrine, Leo is the domicile of the Sun and Cancer of the Moon, while all the other five planets have two domiciles each: Saturn, Capricorn and Aquarius; Jupiter, Sagittarius and Pisces; Mars, Scorpio and

אמר בטלמיס: מי שמזל טלה או מאזנים יסבב על נפשו מיתתו או יהרוג את עצמו.⁷⁵

Ptolemy said: Someone [in whose natal chart the ruler of the eighth horoscopic house]⁷⁶ is in the sign of Aries or Libra will bring upon himself causes that lead to his death; or he will commit suicide.

אם היה בעל הבית והט' נשרף מהשמש באחת היתדות, יורה כי ילקח בדרך וילך בשביה.⁷⁷

If the ruler of the ninth [horoscopic] house⁷⁸ is burned by the Sun⁷⁹ at one of the cardines,⁸⁰ this indicates that he will be taken prisoner while traveling and held hostage.

ואם היה אחד המזיקים באחת היתדות יורה על רע, ואם היה מזרחי מן השמש ובא החלי והרע קודם חצי ימיו.⁸¹

If one of the maleficent planets is in one of the cardines it indicates evil; if it is to the east of the Sun, illness and misfortune will befall him before the middle of his life.

וזה הבית יורה על אחרית כל דבר, ע"כ אם היה שם ככב טוב ואיננו שב לאחור ולא נשרף ולא בבית קלונו או בית שנאתו או תהיה אחרית טובה לנו.⁸²

This [horoscopic] house⁸³ indicates the end of everything; therefore, if there is a beneficent planet⁸⁴ that is not retrograde there, and it is not burned, and it is neither in his house of dishonor⁸⁵ nor in his house of hate,⁸⁶ the newborn will have a fortunate end.

Aries; Venus, Libra and Taurus; Mercury, Virgo and Gemini. See *Tetrabiblos* I, 17 (ed. Robbins, pp. 79–81); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 256.

⁷⁵ *Moladot*, fol. 57a.

⁷⁶ The eighth horoscopic house indicates “death, inheritance, a pledge, separation, fear, grief, and loss” (*Rešit ḥokmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xlii]).

⁷⁷ *Moladot*, fol. 59a.

⁷⁸ The ninth horoscopic house indicates “travel, distant roads, anyone who may be deposed from his high position, secular lore and faith, serving the Lord, messengers, rumors, dreams, oaths, signs and portents, and laws and statutes” (*Rešit ḥokmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xlii]).

⁷⁹ In *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, Ibn Ezra states that a planet is said to be “burned by the Sun” if the distance between the planet and the Sun is less than 6° (*Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fol. 17b). In *Rešit ḥokmah*, however, he gives a more detailed definition (*Rešit ḥokmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 6, pp. liv–lv]).

⁸⁰ The four cardines are the beginning (cusp) of the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth horoscopic houses. For a definition, see Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 149–150. See also below, n. 131.

⁸¹ *Moladot*, fol. 51b.

⁸² *Ibid.*, fol. 54a.

⁸³ The reference is to the fourth horoscopic house. See above, n. 68.

⁸⁴ Jupiter, Venus, or the Moon. See *Tetrabiblos* I, 5 (ed. Robbins, p. 39); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 232–233.

⁸⁵ A planet is said to be in its “house of dishonor” (*beit qalon*), which is Ibn Ezra’s special name for the astrological notion of “depression” or “fall,” if it is in the sign opposite to that of its “house of honor” (*beit kavod*) or “exaltation.” For the exaltations and depressions of the planets see *Tetrabiblos* I, 19 (ed. Robbins, pp. 89); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 258.

⁸⁶ A planet is said to be in its “house of hate” (*beit šinʿah*), which is Ibn Ezra’s special name for the astrological notion of “detriment,” if it is in the sign opposite to that of its domicile or planetary house. See, for example, *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 2, p. 10 [Venus], p. 15 [Mercury]); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 257.

אם היה בעל הבית הח' במבט רע עם המזיקים, יורה על צרות רבות.⁸⁷

And if the ruler of the eighth [horoscopic] house is in an unfortunate aspect⁸⁸ with the maleficent planets, it indicates that [the newborn] will suffer many troubles.

ואם היה בעל הבית הב' תחת אור השמש וצדק במקום רע לעולם יהיה עני.⁸⁹

And if the ruler of the second [horoscopic] house⁹⁰ is under the rays of the Sun⁹¹ and Jupiter is in an unfortunate place, [the newborn] will always be poor.

הבית הח': אם היה השליט על הנולד נותן כחו לבעל הבית הח' יהיה הנולד כל ימיו בדאגה ושממון ופחד המות.⁹²

The eighth [horoscopic] house: If the ruler over the newborn⁹³ gives its power to the ruler of the eighth [horoscopic] house, then the newborn will suffer from depression his entire life [and be] full of anxiety and fear of death.

אם היה המזל הצומח בטלה או מאזנים יסבב סבות הוא בעצמו למיתתו ויהיה לו ממון מן הנשים ויהיה חלי קבוע בא אחיו.⁹⁴

If the ascending zodiacal sign is Aries or Libra, [the newborn] will cause his own death and have money from women, and his brother will suffer from a chronic illness.

ואם מאדים תחת אור השמש וככה בעל הבית הג' ובעל הגורל ימותו כל אחיו בימיו.⁹⁵

And if Mars is under the rays of the Sun, and the same happens with the ruler of the third [horoscopic] house⁹⁶ and the ruler of the lot,⁹⁷ all his brothers will die during his lifetime.

⁸⁷ *Moladot*, fol. 56b.

⁸⁸ Opposition and quartile. For the astrological aspects, see above, §5 n. 18.

⁸⁹ *Moladot*, fol. 52a.

⁹⁰ The second horoscopic house indicates “money, property, negotiations, food, his aides and subordinates, witnesses, keys, and treasures” (*Rešit ḥoḳmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xli]).

⁹¹ According to Ibn Ezra, a planet is “under the light of the Sun” (*taḥat ʿor ha-šemeš*) or “under the spark of the Sun” (*taḥat nišoḥ ha-šemeš*) if it is 15° before or after the Sun. See *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fol. 20a; *Rešit ḥoḳmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 5, p. liii).

⁹² *Moladot*, fol. 56b.

⁹³ A planet is said to be the “ruler over the newborn” (*šaliṭ/paqid ʿal ha-nolad*) if it has the maximum number of “powers” in one of the “places of domination” (*meqomot ha-æerarah*) of the natal horoscope. For the special “scale of powers” that underlies this calculation, see above, n. 60. According to *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fol. 22b, the places of domination are: the place of the Sun, the place of the Moon, and the place of the conjunction of the Moon and the Sun before birth.

⁹⁴ *Moladot*, fol. 52b.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 52b.

⁹⁶ The third horoscopic house indicates “brothers, sisters, relatives, in-laws, wisdom, knowledge of the Torah and laws, dreams, humility, council, faith, epistles, rumors, and short journeys” (*Rešit ḥoḳmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xli]).

⁹⁷ The reference is to the “ruler” of the “lot of the brothers.” For the notion of astrological lots, see below, §11, n. 33. In the case of the “lot of the brothers,” the distance calculated from the ascendant is between Saturn and Jupiter. *Rešit ḥoḳmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 9, p. lxviii). The planet that is the ruler of the lot of the brothers is the one with the maximum number of “powers” in this particular place.

ואם מאדים יהיה נחבר עמו [צדק] או במבט רע אליו ימותו רוב בניו.⁹⁸

And if Mars is in conjunction with it [Jupiter] or in an unfortunate aspect with it, most of his sons will die [during his lifetime].

ומאדים יורה על הריגה או אכילת חיות ... ואם היה בעל הבית הז' בבית הט' יורה כי יפול ממקום גבוה וימות ... אמר סהל הישראלי כי ראה בספר הרזים של חנוך כי הנוולד בסוף דגים ימות בשריפת אש, ואם היה שבתי בבית הח' והוא מתולדת המים ימות במים. ואם מתולדת העפר סופו למות במפולת.⁹⁹

And Mars indicates killing and [being eaten by] wild beasts, ... and if the ruler of the seventh [horoscopic] house¹⁰⁰ is in the ninth house, it indicates that [the newborn] will fall from a high place and die ... Sahal the Israelite¹⁰¹ said that he saw in the *Book of Secrets* by Enoch [Hermes] that if someone is born at the end of Pisces, he will die by fire, and if Saturn is the ruler of the eighth house and it has a watery nature, he will die by water, and if it has an earthy nature he will die in a collapse.

Paragraph 8 clearly shows that the Provençal scholars had Abraham Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-moladot* in front of them as they wrote. It is noteworthy that they were interested mainly in the alleged pre-determination of events and less in astrological theory; they did not mention any theoretical points and focused their attention on calamitous events.

§ 9

[29] **Through human deeds or from the Heavens?** The Provençal scholars now ask whether the astrologer can predict the astral misfortunes enumerated in the previous paragraph; and, if so, whether their

knowledge can help prevent them or whether they are inevitable. They also ask whether astrologers can know whether these calamities will stem from human or divine action. This dilemma probably has its roots in the two opposing archetypes featured in the final part of the introduction of *Sefer ha-moladot* (see above, p. 138). Two similar alternatives are also presented in the last section of the responsum by Sherira Gaon and Hai Gaon (see above, p. 100).

§ 10

[30] **Pronounce their judgment.** Hebrew: לְדִין. This biblical term,¹⁰² in the astrological sense, was first employed by Ibn Ezra throughout his astrological work, notably in those passages of *Sefer ha-moladot* and *Sefer ha-še'elot* quoted in *Queries* (see §3, n. 13; §15, n. 43). The term appears in Ibn Ezra's work as both verbal and substantive; both forms were borrowed by the authors of *Queries*.¹⁰³ The term is very similar in

⁹⁸ *Moladot*, fol. 54b.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 57a.

¹⁰⁰ The seventh horoscopic house indicates "women, sexual intercourse, disputes, war, litigation, thieves, partnership, and commerce" (*Rešit hoḳmah* [ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xlii]).

¹⁰¹ An astrologer active in the early ninth century and the author of many books on astrology studied throughout the Middle Ages. See: B.R. Goldstein, "Astronomy and the Jewish Community," pp. 26–27; Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, p. 5.

¹⁰² Gen. 49:16; Deut. 32:36; Ps. 7:9, 9:9, 72:2, 86:10; etc.

¹⁰³ The biblical verb *la-din*, as employed by Ibn Ezra, denotes the idea that the astrologer's statements are akin to judgments; in *Queries* this form is used in §§10, 15, and 21. The substantive *dinim* (*dinin*), with a qualifying astrological term, points to a specific astrological doctrine; this form appears in the term דיני השאלות (judgments based on the doctrine of posing questions), found in *Queries* §§15, 16, 17, and 21, and in the term דיני המולדות (judgments based on the doctrine of nativities), found in *Queries* §§15 and 17.

meaning to *mišpaṭim*, another astrological term coined by Ibn Ezra (see above, §5, n. 20).¹⁰⁴

[31] **It is found in the books of the scholars ... who will be affected, and when?** The allusion to “the books of the scholars” again points to Ibn Ezra’s astrological treatises. But unlike their earlier use of Ibn Ezra’s works, here the writers draw on them for specific and technical information. In fact, §§10–11 are a digression, requesting clarification of astrological theory itself rather than of its religious implications. The writers of *Queries* refer to the theory of the horoscope, particularly to two of the twelve horoscopic houses. The houses (Greek *topoi*, Latin *loci*, Arabic *buyūt*, Hebrew *batim*) are the twelve divisions of the ecliptic that form the basis for every astrological calculation and are held to govern a variety of human relationships and experiences.¹⁰⁵ Paragraph 10 begins with “the fate of the father” as it can be predicted “from the nativity of the son,” which is a general reference to the fourth horoscopic house.¹⁰⁶ It goes on to ask about “the life of the newborn’s brothers,” a general reference to the main characteristic of the third horoscopic house.¹⁰⁷ The Provençal scholars again draw on *Sefer ha-moladot*; the reference to brothers who are “older,” “middle,” or “young” is an almost word-for-word quotation from the chapter in *Sefer ha-moladot* that deals with the third horoscopic house, itself a paraphrase of Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*:

אמר בטלמיוס כי שבתי והשמש יורו על האחים הגדולים מהנולד וצדק
ומאדים יורו על האמצעיים וככב חמה יורה על הקטנים.¹⁰⁸

Translation: Ptolemy said that Saturn and the Sun indicate the fate of the brothers who are older than the newborn, Jupiter and Mars indicate [the fate of] the middle [brothers], and Mercury indicates [the fate of] the younger [brothers].¹⁰⁹

Similarly, the reference to the configuration of stars indicating that “all of the newborn’s brothers will die during his lifetime,” that “most of the newborn’s sons will die,” or that “some chronic disease will befall one of the [newborn’s] brothers,” is also taken from *Sefer ha-moladot*:

¹⁰⁴ On these related terms, see Sela, “El papel de Abraham Ibn Ezra,” pp. 167–174, 180–191. Their kindred character stems, in part, from the fact that both terms appear in close proximity in the Bible (Job 36:17; Jer. 21:12; Ps. 9:5).

¹⁰⁵ For the twelve horoscopic houses, see: Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie grecque*, pp. 276–288; S. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Suffolk, 1987) pp. 25–29, 37–41; Nallino, “Astrology,” pp. 496–497. For an exposition of the twelve horoscopic houses in Ibn Ezra’s astrological work, see *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, pp. xli–xlii). For a succinct description of the second, third, fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and twelfth houses, see above, nn. 65, 68, 70, 76, 78, 90, 96, 100. The most detailed description is in *Moladot*, fols. 48a–59a; but see also *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fols. 16a–17a. For a description of the twelve horoscopic houses in classical medieval Arabic astrology, see: Abū Maʿshar, *Kitāb al-madhal* (ed. Lemay, 7:333–369); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 275.

¹⁰⁶ For a description of the scope of the human relationships and experiences of the fourth horoscopic house, see, for example, Abū Maʿshar, *Kitāb al-madhal* (ed. Lemay, 5:340–343); *Moladot*, fols. 53a–54a. See also above, n. 68. On father-and-son horoscopes, see B.R. Goldstein and D. Pingree, “Horoscopes from the Cairo Geniza,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 36 (1977): 113–144; eidem, “More Horoscopes from the Cairo Geniza,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125 (1981): 155–189.

¹⁰⁷ For a description of the scope of the third horoscopic house, see above, n. 96. See also Abū Maʿshar, *Kitāb al-madhal* (ed. Lemay, 5:338–340); *Moladot*, fols. 52b–53a. For the role of each of the twelve horoscopic houses of such a horoscope, see Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, p. 275.

¹⁰⁸ *Moladot*, fol. 52b.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* III, 5 (ed. Robbins, pp. 250–255).

ואם מאדים תחת אור השמש וככה בעל הבית הג' ובעל הגורל ימותו כל אחיו בימיו.¹¹⁰

Translation: “If Mars, the ruler¹¹¹ of the third [horoscopic] house,¹¹² and the ruler of the lot¹¹³ are under the rays of the Sun,¹¹⁴ then all his brothers will die during his lifetime.”

ואם מאדים יהיה נחבר עמו או במבט רע אליו ימותו רוב בניו.¹¹⁵

Translation: If Mars is in conjunction with it [Jupiter] or in an unfortunate aspect¹¹⁶ with it, most of his sons will die.

כי אם היה המזל הצומח בטלה או מאזנים... יהיה חלי קבוע בא [באחד] מאחיו.¹¹⁷

Translation: If the ascending zodiacal sign¹¹⁸ is Aries or Libra ... then some chronic disease will befall one of his brothers.

§ 11

[32] **The third house indicates the relatives and the in-laws.** The implicit references to the third and fourth horoscopic houses in §10 are made explicit in §11. The terminology employed by the Provençal scholars to describe the astrological significance of these two houses strongly suggests that here they depended on Ibn Ezra’s *Rešit ḥokmah* (The beginning of wisdom).¹¹⁹ This is shown in the description of the third horoscopic house as the one that “indicates [the fate of] the relatives and the in-laws” (יורה על הקרובים והחתנים), which is almost identical to the wording used in *Rešit ḥokmah* to describe this horoscopic house:

הבית השלישי יורה על האחים והאחיות והקרובים והחתנים.¹²⁰

Translation: The third [horoscopic] house indicates the fate of the brothers, sisters, relatives, and in-laws [of the newborn].

[33] **The lot of the father and the lot of the father’s father. Hebrew:** גורל האב וגורל אבי האב. *Goral* is the Hebrew term for “astrological lot.” The astrological lots (Greek *kleros*, Latin *pars-sors*, Arabic *sahm*) are special celestial locations that play an important role in the natal chart and generally involve the calculation of a certain distance from a certain place in the zodiac, especially from the ascendant.¹²¹ In the particular case of the “lot of the father,” the distance calculated from the ascendant is from the Sun to Saturn during the day and from Saturn to the Sun during the night.¹²² In all likelihood, the Provençal scholars derived

¹¹⁰ *Moladot*, fol. 52b.

¹¹¹ See above, n. 74.

¹¹² See above, n. 96.

¹¹³ See above, n. 97.

¹¹⁴ See above, n. 91.

¹¹⁵ *Moladot*, fols. 54a–54b.

¹¹⁶ See above, §5 n. 18.

¹¹⁷ *Moladot*, fol. 52b.

¹¹⁸ See above, n. 66.

¹¹⁹ This treatise was written in 1148 in the city of Béziers, in Provence. For a bibliographical account of *Rešit ḥokmah*, see Sela, “Ibn Ezra’s Scientific Corpus,” pp. 120–121.

¹²⁰ *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, p. xli).

¹²¹ For a discussion of this astrological concept, see: Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie grecque*, pp. 288–310; Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, pp. 27–29, 39–40; J. D. North, *Chaucer’s Universe* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 217–220; Nallino, “Astrology,” p. 495.

¹²² *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 9, p. lxxviii); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 284, 289.

their information about this from the chapter in *Rešit ḥokmah* devoted to the astrological lots of the horoscopic houses:

הבית הרביעי יש לו שבעה גורלות, האחד גורל האב ... השלישי גורל אבי האב...¹²³

Translation: The fourth [horoscopic] house has seven lots; the first is the lot of the father; ... the third is the lot of the father's father ...

The Hebrew *goral* in the sense of astrological lot can be found in the *Baraita de-Mazzalot* (an early Hebrew astrological work), in Abraham Bar Ḥiyya's *Megillat ha-megalleh*, and in Ibn Ezra.¹²⁴ Since, however, *goral* is used in the Bible with the basic meaning of fate (Dan. 12:13; Isa. 17:14), it is not clear whether the writers of *Queries* were aware of the technical astrological meaning with which Ibn Ezra and other Hebrew astrologers had invested this Hebrew term.

[34] **They said nothing.** A clear complaint against and disappointment with the “books of the scholars” is voiced here. This seems to confirm the hypothesis that the Provençal scholars based their knowledge of “issues related to the father” on *Rešit ḥokmah*, which says very little on this topic apart from an extremely brief description of the scope of the fourth horoscopic house and another brief reference to “the lot of the father and the lot of the father's father.”¹²⁵ What is remarkable in this complaint is that the authors of *Queries* are reprimanding the astrologers, as they knew them from Ibn Ezra's astrological books, on strictly technical grounds, rather than for religious or moral reasons. This kind of complaint against the astrologers is repeated in §7 and notably in §17, where they state that the “science” of the astrologers “is not broad enough.” The writers of *Queries* alternately employ the terms “judgments of the stars” (משפטי הכוכבים), judgments [based on the

posing] of questions (דיני השאלות), and “judgments [based on the doctrine] of nativities (דיני המולדות), all of them borrowed from Ibn Ezra's astrological books,¹²⁶ against which their criticism was levelled.

§ 12

[35] **A futile prayer.** §12 resumes the discussion interrupted at §9. Its main concern is the utility or futility of prayers. The Provençal scholars ask what advice they should give a person who is concerned about his fate but has not consulted an astrologer: Can prayer avert the calamities, or is this “a futile prayer”? In fact, it is not clear exactly what they are asking. They may be referring to Beraḥot 54a, where the cases of a man with a pregnant wife who prays that it be a boy and of a person “crying over the past” are described as “a futile prayer” (“הצועק לשעבר הרי זו”). If so, they are asking whether the stars determine our fates. For if they do, such that there is “utility and succor” in learning one's astrologically ordained destiny from an astrologer, a person who does not know his horoscopic fate is like the man with the pregnant wife praying that it be a boy—which, the talmudic text states, is a “futile prayer.” On the other hand, the writers may be referring Bava Meši'a^a

¹²³ *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 9, p. lxxviii).

¹²⁴ *Baraita de-Mazzalot* in *ʿOšar midrašim*, edited with introductions and notes by J. D. Eisenstein, (New York, 1928), 2:283, par. 13; *Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 119, 124, 125, 128 et passim. Ibn Ezra expounds astrological lots in the following places: *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 9, pp. lxxviii–lxxi); *Sefer ha-ṭe'amim* (first version), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 1056 (hereafter *Ṭe'amim A*), fol. 44a; *Sefer ha-ṭe'amim* (second version), ed. Naphtali Ben Menachem (Jerusalem, 1941), p. 37 (hereafter *Ṭe'amim B*). But see also *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fols. 24a–25a, where Ibn Ezra uses the Hebrew word *manab* instead of *goral*.

¹²⁵ *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 3, pp. xli; ch. 9, p. lxxviii).

¹²⁶ See below, §15, n. 43. See also above, §5, n. 20; §9, n. 30.

42a, where, regarding the utility of prayers, a distinction is made between what is hidden from the eye (*samui min ha-^cayin*) and what is weighed/measured/counted, (*šaql/madud/manui*). In this case, their question is: If you have consulted the astrologer, prayer is futile; but if you have not done so, perhaps your destiny is “hidden from the eye” and can still be modified in response to prayer.

§ 13

[36] Changing his place of residence. In this paragraph the writers express their concern about the relationship between geographical location and astrological influence. Astrologers from Antiquity to the Middle Ages held that the influence of the stars depends on a person’s geographical location and postulated a correlation between each of the seven climates,¹²⁷ on the one hand, and each of the twelve zodiacal signs and each of the seven planets, on the other.¹²⁸ Whereas the astrologers drew no conclusions about the possibility of averting the decrees of the stars from this theory, the Provençal scholars assume that such deliverance is possible if one changes his place of residence. This idea seems to be their own elaboration of the rabbinic dictum: *mešanneh maqom mešanneh mazzal*, i.e. “one who changes his place changes his astrological fate.”¹²⁹ Concerned as they were about the possibility of averting the decrees of the stars, the Provençal scholars asked two related questions: (a) Can one avert the decrees of the stars by changing one’s place of residence? (b) Assuming that the distance that one should relocate is determined by the natal horoscope, is this distance equal for all nativities or does one nativity requires a greater distance than another?

[37] Whether the distance is equal ... a greater distance than another nativity. Assuming that one can escape the stars’ influence by changing one’s place of residence, the writers ask whether the distance one needs to move depends on the configuration of the natal horo-

scope. This idea could have been inspired by the second macro-astrological rule in the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot*, where Ibn Ezra stated that residence in a specific place has more influence on one’s destiny than his individual horoscope and that men with similar horoscopes will meet different fates if they live in different climates.¹³⁰

In addition, the Provençal scholars adopt a dual approach that seems to address one of the major technical problems with which the medieval practitioners of astrology had to come to grips—the calculation of the twelve horoscopic houses, whose beginning and size, unlike the zodiacal signs, vary according to the locality and time for which they are calculated.¹³¹ Notice that the Provençal scholars men-

¹²⁷ The seven climates, as defined in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, were seven zones of the Earth bounded by two parallels of latitude, in which the same phenomena were to be found, such as a prevalent type of weather or the same length of longest daylight. See Resianne Fontaine, “Between Scorching Heat and Freezing Cold: Medieval Jewish Authors on the Inhabited and Uninhabited Parts of the Earth,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000):101–137.

¹²⁸ See *Tetrabiblos* II, 2 (ed. Robbins, pp. 120–123); B.R. Goldstein, ed., “The Book on Eclipses of Masha’allah,” *Physis* 4 (1964):205–213, esp. p. 209; Abū Ma^cshar, *Kitāb al-madhal* (ed. Lemay) 3:389–393 (Arabic text); 5:235–239 (Jean de Séville’s translation); 8:107–109 (Hermann de Carinthie’s translation); Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 238–239. For Ibn Ezra’s contribution, see *Ṭe^camim A*, fol. 36a; *Rešit ḥokmah* (ed. Levy and Cantera, ch. 2, p. ix).

¹²⁹ Based on B Rosh Hashanah 17b.

¹³⁰ *Moladot*, fol. 46b. For a detailed explanation of this part of the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot*, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 158–162.

¹³¹ Usually the beginning (cusp) of four of the houses coincides with the four astrological cardines. The cusp of the first house coincides with the ascendant (the intersection of the ecliptic with the eastern half of the local horizon); the cusp of the fourth house coincides with the lower midheaven, that is, the intersection of the ecliptic with the lower half of the local meridian; the seventh house coincides with

tion two contrasting methods: They ask whether the “distance of the change of place is equal for all the ... natiivities” or whether “one nativity requires a greater distance than another nativity.” This probably follows Ibn Ezra’s analogous dual approach to the problem of calculating the horoscopic houses. In several parts of his astrological treatises, Ibn Ezra noted that astrologers commonly choose one of two different systems to compute the horoscopic houses. The first system, which he calls *ḥilluq ha-mišor* or planar division, simply divides the zodiac into twelve *equal* horoscopic houses and takes no account of the locality where the newborn was delivered. By contrast, the second system, *ḥilluq ha-miš^cadim* or rising-times division, is based on computation of the rising times,¹³² so that the twelve horoscopic houses change as a function of the latitude or horizon of the newborn’s location.¹³³

§ 14

[38] **One Muslim philosopher.** Nothing is known about the identity of this Muslim philosopher, who is said to have spent time in Provence in the second half of the twelfth century.

[39] **The uppermost orb.** The “uppermost orb” here refers to the ninth, starless orb. This can be inferred from the fact that it is here set against “the stars and the zodiacal constellations” carried by the other eight orbs. The Muslim philosopher thus took sides in a controversial issue and upheld the existence of the ninth orb.¹³⁴ Setting the astrological influence of the planets and the fixed stars against that of the ninth orb is an uncommon idea; I am unaware of its use by other opponents of astrology.

[40] **The judgments of the stars.** Hebrew: משפטי הכוכבים. See above, §5, n. 20.

§ 15

41 **Judgments on the basis of questions.** Paragraphs 15–16 focus on the doctrine of interrogations (Greek *eroteseis*, Arabic *masāʿil*, Latin *quaestiones*, Hebrew *šeʿelot*). The idea is that the horoscope of the moment at which someone presents a question to an astrologer allows the latter to determine the correct answer. This system foretells the

the descendant; and the tenth house, with the upper midheaven. But this leaves the task uncompleted, giving rise to multiple methodologies for calculating the remaining eight horoscopic houses. For an account of several of these methodologies, see E. Kennedy, “The Astrological Houses as Defined by Medieval Islamic Astronomers,” pp. 535–578 in idem, *Astronomy and Astrology in the Medieval Islamic World* (Aldershot, 1998).

¹³² That is, how many degrees of the equator cross the horizon of a given locality simultaneously with the consecutive zodiacal signs. On rising times, see *The Code of Maimonides, Sanctification of the New Moon*, trans. S. Gandz, introduction by Julian Obermann, astronomical commentary by O. Neugebauer (New Haven, 1967), pp. 142–143.

¹³³ For an account of these two systems, see especially: *Mišpeṭei ha-mazzalot*, fols. 15b–16a; *Ṭeʿanim A*, fol. 44b. See also Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, p. 160 n. 39. Abraham Bar Ḥiyya in the astrological history that constitutes the fifth chapter of his *Megillat ha-megalleh* applies these two systems to characterize some of the horoscopic houses (*Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 120, 121, 137, 151). He was acquainted with the techniques of the Arabic astrologers. See Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer Ḥešbon mableḳot ha-koḳavim*, ed. J. M. Millás Vallicrosa (Barcelona, 1959), ch. 18, pp. 103–105. In the *Baraita de-Mazzalot* there is a single and extremely brief mention of the house of life—a reference to the first horoscopic house—but no allusion to the calculation of the houses (see *Baraita de-Mazzalot* [ed. Eisenstein, 2:283, par. 13]).

¹³⁴ For a twelfth-century description of the ninth orb and of the controversy about its existence, see Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer Šurat ha-ʿareš*, ed. S. Münster (Basilea, 1546), pp. 3–5: “The ninth is the orb that propels all from east to west around the two

future in response to questions about common events of daily life, such as finding a missing person, catching a thief, or recovering a lost item.¹³⁵

[42] **Even though they have no knowledge of the inquirer's nativity.** The writers highlight a problem with the doctrine of interrogations—that the astrologer interprets a horoscope cast at the moment when the question is posed,¹³⁶ neglecting the natal horoscope of his client, which is the cornerstone of genethliological astrology or the doctrine of nativities.

[43] **Some astrologers have maintained ... we can know the thoughts and questions.** Paragraph 15 is almost entirely a verbatim quotation from the introduction to the first version of Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-še'elot* (Book of the Questions), a treatise devoted to expounding the doctrine of *interrogations* and part of Ibn Ezra's astrological encyclopedia, composed in 1148 in the city of Béziers in Provence.¹³⁷

חכמי המזלות נחלקו בשאלות לשתי תורות גדולות. התורה האחת חנוך ובטלמיוס וקדמונים רבים עמהם. וכלם אומרים כי דיני המזלות הם ברורים ונכונים בדברי העולם ובנולדים רק השאלות אין בהם ממש. וטעמם: ידוע כי כל מה שיקרה בתחתיים הוא בעבור תנועות העליונים, וישתנו כפי השתנות מערכתם זה אל זה. והנה זה דבר התולדת נכון שיורו העליונים על כל הנבראים כפי תולדתם. ובעבור שנשמת האדם עליונה יוכל להשמר ולהוסיף גם לגרוע, על כן לא יורו העליונים על כל השאלות שתעלנה על לב האדם. ואלה הם חכמים גדולים בדיעות הגלגלים. והתורה השנית ראשם דורוניאוס וחכמי הודו וחכמי פרס וחכמי מצרים וכל חכמי המזלות שהם קרובים אלינו. וכולם מודים כי דיני השאלות נכונים כדיני המולדות. וזה טעמם: ידוע הוא בחכמת התולדת כי מחשבות הנפש תשתנינה כפי השתנות תולדת הגוף, והנה כח הנשמה יתהפך כפי התהפך כח הגוף, ואחר שהכבדים יורו על תולדת הגוף והתהפכו הנה נוכל לדעת המחשבות והשאלות.¹³⁸

Translation: The astrologers are divided into two great schools of thought regarding the [doctrine of foretelling the future in response to] questions. The first is the school of thought of Enoch [Hermes],¹³⁹ Ptolemy, and many of the ancients with them. They all maintain that astrological judgments are clear and trustworthy, both with respect to general worldly matters and with respect to

poles that are in the north and in the south. This orb has no star; God Almighty set it to encompass all the other orbs and to set them all in motion from east to west. This is the opinion of the philosophers. ... But the astronomers did not take the ninth orb into consideration, ... since no ocular proof of it is available. ... They reckon only eight orbs in the heavens, the highest being the orb of the zodiacal constellations, which propels all the other orbs from east to west." For Ibn Ezra's and Maimonides' positions on this issue, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 224–233. For Averroes' position, see A. I. Sabra, "The Andalusian Revolt against Ptolemaic Astronomy: Averroes and al-Bitrūjī," in E. Mendelsohn, ed., *Transformation and Tradition in the Sciences* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 139–40, 149–50.

¹³⁵ On this astrological technique, see: Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie grecque*, pp. 458–486; Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, pp. 88–92; Nallino, "Astrology," pp. 495–496; D. Pingree, "Astrology," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), 1:123–125.

¹³⁶ For the role of each of the twelve horoscopic houses of such a horoscope, see Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 276–277.

¹³⁷ For a bibliographical note on Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-še'elot*, see Sela, "Ibn Ezra's Scientific Corpus," pp. 126–128.

¹³⁸ *Še'elot A*, fol. 62b.

¹³⁹ A mythical figure to whom the so-called Hermetic writing, which include significant astrological material, are ascribed. Ibn Ezra knew him as "Enoch." On astrological works in Greek ascribed to Hermes, see E.S. Kennedy and D. Pingree, *The Astrological History of Māshā'llāh*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 89 n. 13. See also Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, pp. 20–29.

[private] matters related to newborns,¹⁴⁰ and only the doctrine [based on the posing] of questions is of no substance. Their argument: It is known that everything that occurs to [the bodies] of the lower world is caused by the movements of the upper bodies and they [the former] change according to the configuration in which they [the planets] are aligned with each other. This indeed follows from nature; [namely,] that the bodies of the upper world affect [lit. indicate] all the creatures according to their physical nature. [However], since man's soul is superior, he can protect himself; namely, [deliberately] increasing or reducing [what is caused by the stars]. Therefore, the upper bodies do not give an indication about all the questions that men may entertain. These are outstanding scholars in the knowledge of the orbs. The second school of thought is headed by Doronius,¹⁴¹ the scholars of India, the scholars of Persia, the scholars of Egypt, and the astrologers who are close to us. They all concur that the judgments [based on the posing] of questions are as trustworthy as the judgments [based on the doctrine] of nativities. This is their reasoning: It is known in natural science that the thoughts of the mind change in accordance with the change in the physical nature of the body. Therefore, the power of the soul is altered according to the variation of the power of the body; and since the stars indicate the physical nature of the body and how it is altered, therefore we can know the thoughts and [the answers to] questions.

§ 16

[44] **A sound question etc.** In §16 the authors of *Queries* explore the limits of the doctrine of interrogations. A person is troubled by some unspecified problem but decides not to turn to the astrologer to present his question. The Provençal scholars ask Maimonides whether the astrologer is nonetheless capable of giving a prediction if the question is

put to him by a third party. They drew their inspiration from the opening words of the first chapter of the first version of *Sefer ha-še'elot*:

הבית הא': דע כי מחלוקת גדולה יש בין החכמים בדברי השאלות. יש אומרים אם שאל שואל בעבור אדם אחר לעולם תסתכל אל המזל הצומח כי הוא העיקר, וכאשר תראה ככה תדין. ואחרים אמרו כי לעולם המזל הצומח הוא לשואל והז' לאשר ישאל בעבורו.¹⁴²

The first [horoscopic] house: Know that there is a great debate among the astrologers over [judgments based on the posing of] questions: Some of them say that if someone put a question on behalf of another person you should look at the ascending zodiacal sign, for it is the heart of the matter,¹⁴³ and pass judgment according to what you see [there]. But the others said that the ascending zodiacal sign is always in charge of the person who poses the question and the seventh [horoscopic house]¹⁴⁴ is in charge of the person who poses the question on his behalf.

¹⁴⁰ This is a reference to Ptolemy's dual pattern of astrology—universal or general and genethliological—evident in *Tetrabiblos* II, 1 (ed. Robbins, pp. 117–119).

¹⁴¹ Dorotheus of Sidon, an influential astrological poet of the third quarter of the first century CE. See David Pingree, ed., *Dorothei Sidonii Carmen Astrologicum*, Interpretationem arabicam in linguam anglicam versam una cum Dorothei fragmentis et graecis et latinis, (Leipzig 1976), esp. pp. 262–322 (= the fifth book of Dorotheus, on interrogations).

¹⁴² *Še'elot A*, fol. 63b.

¹⁴³ For the ascending zodiacal sign, see above, n. 66.

¹⁴⁴ For the seventh horoscopic house, see above, n. 100.

§ 17

[45] **Their science is not broad enough.** See above, §11, n. 34.

§ 18

[46] **The scholars of our country, who have already followed the path of this science.** This paragraph hints at the existence of Jewish astrologers in Provence in the second half of the twelfth century. This impression is confirmed by a prognostication based on the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1166, which has been ascribed to Abraham Ibn Ezra although it was definitely not written by him.¹⁴⁵ Its terminology reveals that the anonymous author employed some astrological terms peculiar to Ibn Ezra, as well as others that are characteristic of Abraham Bar Ḥiyya but never used by Ibn Ezra. Thus it seems plausible that the author was a Provençal student of Ibn Ezra who was also acquainted with the astrological work of Abraham Bar Ḥiyya. The mixture of terminology in this prognostication is highly reminiscent of the blending of Ibn Ezra's and Bar Ḥiyya's astrological nomenclature in *Queries*.¹⁴⁶

§ 24

[47] **We have already sent other epistles to our Rabbi etc.** In the manuscript, the start of §24 is indented a full third of a line, presumably indicating the beginning of a new section of the text. This impression is borne out by the opening words of the paragraph, which sound like a “new start.” This part of the text does not seem to be a separate epistle, but a postscript or appendix that the writers added to the first part of their letter. For an analysis of the structure of the letter, see the Conclusion.

[48] **Always in the nativity ... sometimes 266 and sometimes 280 days.** This statement is again a verbatim quotation from Ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-moladot*:

אמר בטלמיוס כי נוכל לדעת המעלה הצומחת מדרך מאזנים שלו, יקרא בלשון פרס נימובאר ... והאמת הם מאזני חנוך, רק הם צריכים ב' תיקונים, כי ככה נסיתים פעמים רבות. מאזני חנוך: אמר חנוך לעולם במולד אדם מקום הלבנה ברגע המולד היא המעלה הצומחת ברגע רדת הטיפה ברחם, והמעלה הצומחת ברגע המולד שם היתה הלבנה ברגע הטיפה. ע"כ אם ידענו רגע הטיפה נוכל לדעת רגע המולד, ואם ידענו רגע המולד נוכל לדעת מתי היה רגע הטיפה. וככה נעשה: נסתכל ברגע המולד אם היתה הלבנה למטה מן הארץ או למעלה ממנה. והנה אם מצאנוה במעלה הצומחת ידענו כי הנולד נולד בזמן המעמד האמצעי, שהם רע"ג ימים. ואם היתה הלבנה במעלה השוקעת הנה מעמדו המעמד הקצר, שהם רנ"ט ימים. ואם היה תחת הארץ והוא קרוב מהמעלה השוקעת, אפ' מעלה אחת, הנה מעמדו המעמד הארוך, שהם רפ"ז ימים. והנה יש בין יתד ליתד ז' ימים. ע"כ, אם היתה הלבנה בתחילת קו חצי השמים, היה המעמד רס"ו. ואם היתה בתחילת קו יתד התהום, הנה המעמד ר"פ ימים.¹⁴⁷

Translation: Ptolemy said that we can know the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign [at the time of birth] by means of a comparative method,¹⁴⁸ which is called *Nimubar* in the language of Persia. ... But the most trustworthy is the comparative method of Enoch (Hermes), except that it calls for two corrections, as I myself found out empirically many times. Enoch said: In a man's nativity, the location of the Moon

¹⁴⁵ This text has been studied in depth in B. R. Goldstein, “A Prognostication Based on the Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1166 [561 A.H.],” pp. 735–757 in C. Burnett et al., eds., *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honour of David Pingree* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), which includes a full bibliography of earlier literature.

¹⁴⁶ For the use of Bar Ḥiyya's terminology in *Queries*, see §2, n. 6; §4, n. 16; §5, n. 18; §11, n. 33; §24, n. 50; §25, n. 51.

¹⁴⁷ *Moladot*, fol. 47a.

¹⁴⁸ The comparison is between the place of the Moon and the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at both the time of birth and the time of conception.

at the time of birth is always the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of the descent of the drop [of semen] into the womb. And the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of birth is the place where the Moon was at the moment of the [descent of] the drop [into the womb]. Therefore, if we know the moment of the [descent of the] drop, we can know the moment of birth, and if we know the moment of birth we can know the moment of the [descent of the] drop. We proceed as follows: We observe whether at the moment of birth the Moon was below or above the Earth. If we find it [the Moon] at the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign we know that the period [of pregnancy] of the newborn was the medial, which is 273 days. If the Moon was at the degree of the descending zodiacal sign, then his period [of pregnancy] was the short one, which is 259 days. If it [the Moon] was under the earth and was close to the degree of the descending zodiacal sign, even one degree close to it, then his period [of pregnancy] was the long one, which is 287 days. So that there are seven days between any one of the cardines and the next cardo. Therefore, if the Moon is at the beginning of the line of upper midheaven, the period [of pregnancy] was 266 days. If it is at the beginning of the line of the lower midheaven, the period [of pregnancy] is 280 days.

This passage is part of the treatment of the first subject in *Sefer ha-moladot*, just after the introduction, from which the Provençal scholars already quoted in §3. Ibn Ezra uses the Persian term *nimubar* to refer to a complicated astrological doctrine designed to determine the ascendant, the most fundamental component of a natal horoscope. This doctrine, also called *animodar* and *numūdār*, was employed in those cases when the precise time of birth was not known—the situation in the vast majority of cases.¹⁴⁹ This theory had already been developed

by Greek astrology and is presented in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*.¹⁵⁰ Paragraph 24 alludes to another technical detail of this astrological technique, a late development not found in Ptolemy's work, which focuses on the relation between the ascendant and the location of the Moon at the moments of conception and birth.¹⁵¹

[49] **One scholar made his own contribution.** Abraham Ibn Ezra is the “scholar” referred to here; the “two approaches in the science of the stars,” which the Provençal scholars describe as the scholar's “own contribution,” are the “two corrections” Ibn Ezra presented in *Sefer ha-moladot* to improve Enoch's aforementioned comparative method of *nimubar*:

והחכמים הבאים אחרי חנוך הודו לו באלה המאזנים. גם אני נסיתי כך
ועלה בידו, רק יש פעמים שהוא צריך לאחד מב' תקונים. וכל זה שאמרנו

¹⁴⁹ See: Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie grecque*, pp. 383–390; Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, pp. 78–79.

¹⁵⁰ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* III, 2 (ed. Robbins, pp. 228–235). Ibn Ezra, interestingly enough, refers to three astrological works in which Claudius Ptolemy developed this theory: *Tetrabiblos*, the apocryphal *Sefer ha-ʿilan* (Book of the tree), and the otherwise unknown *Sefer ha-qosem ha-qaṭan* (The little book of the wizard). See *Moladot*, fol. 47a: “מאזני המולד: אמר בטלמיס כי נוכל לדעת המעלה הצומחת מדרך מאזנים שלו יקרא בלשון פרס” The same theory, with a similar reference to Claudius Ptolemy, is also alluded to in the second version of *Sefer ha-ṭeʿamim* (*Ṭeʿamim B*, p. 32). Note that a similar idea, namely that the zodiacal sign in which the Moon is located at the time of birth is the zodiacal sign of the ascendant at the time of conception, appears in sentence 51 of the apocryphal *Centiloquium*, attributed to Claudius Ptolemy and well known to Ibn Ezra. See Claude Ptolomée, *Les Cent Sentences Astrologiques* (Paris, 1938), p. 25.

¹⁵¹ For its development in Arabic astrology, see Nallino, “Astrology,” p. 496. For the doctrine of *animodar* in Al-Qabīṣī's *Introductorium as scientiam astrologiae iudicialis*,

הוא אמת בנולדים בקרוב מט' חודשים, והם רובי האדם. רק יש לפרקים שיוולד הנולד בחודש הז', גם בחודש הי"א. והנה אזכיר לך התקונים. הסתכל אם היו הימים קרובים מיציאת הנולד ויכנס נגה או ככב חמה, שהם הככבים השפלים ותולדתם קרובה מתולדת הלבנה, במקום שהלבנה עתידה להיותה שם ברגע המולד, ויהיה שלטון המקום לנגה או לככב חמה. הסתכל ברגע היות הלבנה על מבט רביעית עם הככב ההוא במעלה הנזכרת, אז יצא הנולד קודם ז' ימים מימי המעמד הראוי ... והתקון הב': הסתכל אם יכנס מאדים במקום הלבנה ברגע הטיפה, והוא בביתו או בבית כבודו, והזמן קרוב כמו ז' ימים מקום המעמד והתחברה הלבנה עם מאדים, אז יצא הנולד קודם המעמד.¹⁵²

Translation: The scholars who came after Enoch concurred with him regarding this comparative method.¹⁵³ I too tried it out empirically and was successful. However, in certain cases [this method] calls for one of two corrections. All that we have already said [about Enoch's method] is true regarding those who are born after roughly nine months [of pregnancy], which is the case of the majority of human beings. But occasionally a baby is born in the seventh or in the eleventh month. I now mention the [two] corrections. [The first correction:] Look whether, in the days close to delivery, Venus or Mercury, which are the lower stars and whose nature is akin to the Moon's nature, move into the place where the Moon is to be at the time of birth, and [check whether] Venus or Mercury have rulership of this place.¹⁵⁴ If you observe that the Moon is in quartile aspect with the star that is in the aforementioned degree, then the baby will be born seven days before the appropriate period [of pregnancy]. ... And this is the second correction: Look whether Mars moves into the place where the Moon was at the moment of the [descent of] the drop and if [Mars] is in its [planetary] house or in its exaltation;¹⁵⁵ if that happens close to seven days before the period [of pregnancy] and if the Moon is

in conjunction with Mars, the baby will be born before the [appropriate] period [of pregnancy].

In this instance the Provençal scholars summarized *Sefer ha-moladot* instead of quoting it. They wanted to highlight that occasionally babies are born “seven days before the [appropriate] period [of pregnancy]” because they knew from *Sefer ha-moladot* that this is the common denominator of Ibn Ezra's “two corrections.”

[50] **The science of the stars. Hebrew: חכמת הכוכבים.** This term, which does not appear in Ibn Ezra's writings, was apparently introduced by Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, who used it at least three times.¹⁵⁶ Assuming that

see North, *Chaucer's Universe*, pp. 213–214. For several systems of *numūdār* in medieval astrological literature, see E.S. Kennedy, “Treatise V of Kāshī's Khāqāni Zīj: The Determination of the Ascendant,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 10 (1995/6):123–145. For a very similar report about *numūdār*, including the idea that the ascendant may be determined by exploring the relation between the ascendant and the place of the Moon at the time of conception and the time of birth, as well as a strikingly parallel account of the periods of pregnancy, see Al-Bīrūnī, *Art of Astrology*, pp. 328–331. For the role of *animodar* in the last chapter of both the Castilian and the Latin versions of Abraham Zacuto's *Almanach Perpetuum*, see J. Chabás and B. Goldstein, *Astronomy in the Iberian Peninsula, Abraham Zacut and the Transition from Manuscript to Print* (Philadelphia, 2000), pp. 86, 150–153.

¹⁵² *Moladot*, fol. 47a.

¹⁵³ See above, n. 148.

¹⁵⁴ On “rulership,” see above, n. 60, 74, 93.

¹⁵⁵ On “planetary house,” see above, n. 231. On “house of exaltation,” see above, n. 85.

¹⁵⁶ In the astrological history included in *Megillat ha-megalleh*, pp. 145, 151, in the introduction to *Ṣurat ha-ʿareṣ* (ed. Münster, pp. 3–5), and particularly in the epistle

the text of *Queries* is not corrupt (it is conceivable that the authors wrote *ḥokmat mišpetei ha-kokavim*), it is noteworthy that the Provençal scholars employed this term to refer to a distinctively astrological doctrine, whereas for Bar Ḥiyya “the science of the stars” means a mixed body of knowledge comprising both astronomy and astrology.¹⁵⁷ Maimonides, in the *Letter on Astrology*, uses “the science of the stars” to refer to astronomy alone.¹⁵⁸

§ 25

[51] **The science of observation.** Hebrew: חכמת החזיון. This term is found in three of Abraham Bar Ḥiyya’s astronomical works, where it is synonymous with astronomy.¹⁵⁹ Just as in the case of “the science of the stars” (see above, §24, n. 50), however, the Provençal scholars used it to denote astrology. This confusion is a result of the blurring of the borders between astronomy and astrology, which persisted in the twelfth century.¹⁶⁰

[52] **Our Rabbi of blessed memory ... taught us ... at the hour of birth.** Paragraph 25 is concerned with “birth programming,” i.e., choosing the appropriate moment for sexual intercourse in order to protect the child who may be conceived from harm. The Provençal scholars viewed this as a practical application of *nimubar*, the astrological theory they presented in the previous paragraph.¹⁶¹ They based this query on a debate between Ptolemy and Enoch about “birth programming,” discussed in Ibn Ezra’s *Sefer ha-moladot*:

ויאמר בטלמיוס: אעפ”י שהעקר היה ראוי להיותו המעלה הצומחת ברגע הטיפה, גם המעלה הצומחת ברגע המולד משתתפת עמה. ויאמר חנוך כי מן המעלה הצומחת ברגע הטפה נוכל לדעת כל המקרים שיקרו לשליל עד שיצא מבטן אמו, ומהמעלה הצומחת ברגע המולד נוכל לדעת כל הדברים שיקרו לו בעודו בעולם שיצא שם, כי בצאתו יקבל כח האויר, ומאותו כח יקבל כח

addressed to Rabbi Judah b. Barzilai of Barcelona (Bar Ḥiyya, “Epistle addressed to Rabbi Judah,” pp. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 33, 35, 36).

¹⁵⁷ See Sela, “Fuzzy Borders,” pp. 82–83, 90–91. Notice also that a very similar phenomenon occurs in paragraph §25 with regard to “the science of observation” (see below, §25, n. 51), another term peculiar to Abraham Bar Ḥiyya.

¹⁵⁸ Marx, “Correspondence,” p. 351: דעו רבותי שחכמת הכוכבים שהיא חכמה דאית היא ידיעת צורת הגלגלים. As far as I know, the expression *ḥokmat ha-kokavim* does not appear in any of Maimonides’ other works.

¹⁵⁹ See Abraham Bar Ḥiyya, *Sefer Šurat ha-³areš* (ed. Münster, pp. 4–5, 65 et passim); *Sefer Hešbon mableḡot ha-kokavim* (ed. Millás Vallicrosa, pp. 3, 19); *Sefer ha-⁶ibbur*, ed. T. Philipofsky (London, 1851), p. 78. For the use of *ḥokmat ha-ḥizzayon* in *Sefer Šurat ha-³areš*, see Sela, “Fuzzy Borders,” pp. 90–91. Interestingly enough, this expression does not appear in the pair of works in which Abraham Bar Ḥiyya dealt directly with astrology, namely, his apologetic epistle to Rabbi Judah b. Barzilai of Barcelona, justifying the study and use of a specific kind of astrology, and the astrological history he inserted in the fifth chapter of *Megillat ha-megalleh*.

¹⁶⁰ For an expansion on this subject, see Sela, “Fuzzy Borders,” pp. 59–100.

¹⁶¹ The Provençal scholars could have drawn inspiration from Abraham Ibn Ezra’s long commentary on Exodus 2:2. The wording of the reference there to the doctrine of *nimubar* is very similar to that employed by the Provençal scholars in §24. In the commentary, Ibn Ezra harnessed the doctrine of *nimubar* to argue against a midrashic interpretation that Moses, in order to escape Pharaoh’s decree, was programmed to be born in the seventh month, when newborns are undersized. To clinch his argument, Ibn Ezra (paraphrasing what he himself wrote in *Sefer ha-moladot*) states that “one who knows the time of [the beginning of] pregnancy can ascertain the time of birth, and one who knows the time of birth can ascertain the time of [the beginning of] pregnancy. This was tried out by the ancients. I myself have tried it out five times. For the degree of the sign where the Moon is at the moment of [the beginning of] pregnancy is also the degree of the ascendant at the moment of begetting. The degree of the ascendant at the moment of [the beginning of] pregnancy is also the degree of the sign where the Moon is at the moment of begetting. Now the time set aside for carrying a

הנשמה העליונה כפי ממסך נגה ותולדת האויר. ויפה אמר, ע"כ אין לנו צורך במעלה הצומחת ברגע הטיפה.¹⁶²

Translation: Ptolemy said: Although the essence [of the method] should be [to pay attention to] the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment [of the descent] of the drop [of semen], the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of birth is also to be taken into consideration. And Enoch said that from the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment [of the descent] of the drop [of semen] we can know all the events that will befall the fetus till it is delivered from its mother's womb; and from the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment of birth we can know everything that will happen to him while he is in the world into which he is delivered. For at birth he will receive the power of the air, and from this power he will receive the power of [his] superior soul, according to the admixture of Venus and the nature of air.¹⁶³ And [in my opinion] he is completely right! Therefore we have no need for the degree of the ascending zodiacal sign at the moment [of the descent] of the drop [of semen].

Here “our Rabbi, of blessed memory” refers to Abraham Ibn Ezra. When they write that he “taught us to guard ourselves against the baneful star *at the hour of birth*” they are summarizing the contents of the present paragraph in *Sefer ha-moladot* and of the previous one. Two additional points deserve mention: (a) *lehiššamer* (lit. to protect oneself, take precautions against), which conveys the recommendation of the anonymous rabbi, has already appeared in *Queries* three times with a similar astrological sense, always within a quotation from Ibn Ezra;¹⁶⁴ (b) the expression *koḳav mazziq* ‘baneful star’ is very frequent in Ibn Ezra’s astrological work, especially in *Sefer ha-moladot*.¹⁶⁵

§ 26

[53] **If our Rabbi sees fit to respond regarding this, please write it in a separate letter.** This request pertains to the query put in §§24–25: Maimonides is requested to send his reply to this specific subject in a separate and confidential letter,¹⁶⁶ to keep it from becoming available to the public at large. The obvious reason for this request is the topic—choosing an appropriate time for sexual intercourse—which is considered to be indelicate. The writers who requested this confidential and separate letter from Maimonides call themselves “the chaste” (*ha-ṣenu^cim*), a talmudic term (Qiddushin 71a) that here signifies “free of obscenity.”¹⁶⁷

[54] **Rabbi Jonathan, who is one of the rabbis and pious men in our country.** The only resident of Provence identified by name in the letter is R. Jonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel (ca. 1130–after 1211), presented in the letter as a resident of Montpellier. From other sources we know that

child is 259 days and a third. The medial time for pregnancy is 273 days. The maximum time for being with child is 287 days. The scholars of nativities will admit this” (ed. Weiser, 2:16).

¹⁶² *Moladot*, fol. 47b.

¹⁶³ The theory alluded to in the last sentence is characteristic of Ibn Ezra. See, e.g., Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Sefer yesod mora² wi-ysod Torah*, VII:4–5 in *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader*. Annotated texts with introductions and commentaries by I. Levin (New York and Tel Aviv, 1985), p. 330; long commentary on Exodus 23:25 (ed. Weiser, 2:164)

¹⁶⁴ See §§3, 7, and 15.

¹⁶⁵ See especially *Moladot*, fols. 49a, 50a, 51a, 51b et passim. Note that *koḳav mazziq* is rather unusual in contemporary or earlier Hebrew astrological literature. For some examples, see the quotations from *Sefer ha-moladot* in §8 n. 28.

¹⁶⁶ This point was already noted by I. Sonne, “Maimonides’ Epistle to Shmuel Ibn Tibbon,” (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 10 (1939):135–154 and 309–322, on p. 141.

¹⁶⁷ See *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nashim, Kiddushin*, translated into English with

R. Jonathan ha-Kohen was an ascetic scholar and talmudist, the author of commentaries on the Mishnah, Gemara, and R. Isaac Alfasi. He was the most important rabbi in Lunel and one of the leaders of the “300 French and English rabbis” who emigrated in 1211 to Eretz Israel, where he died. He is also mentioned by Maimonides’ son R. Abraham as a disciple of R. Abraham ben David of Posquières (the Rabad).¹⁶⁸ Although R. Jonathan ha-Kohen is categorized as “one of the rabbis and pious men in our country,” the text says nothing of his role in the composition of *Queries*. Because he is specified as the recipient, on behalf of “the chaste” (*ba-ṣenu^cim*), of the separate confidential reply from Maimonides, we know that he must have been connected with the letter writers, whether or not he was numbered among them.¹⁶⁹

A. Marx, in the notes to the *editio princeps*, stated that *Queries* was the first link in an epistolary chain of queries and responsa between R. Jonathan ha-Kohen and Maimonides, which in the course of time created strong bonds of mutual affection and admiration.¹⁷⁰ Although neither R. Jonathan nor other Provençal scholars explicitly refer to Maimonides’ *Letter on Astrology*, some words in a letter from the former to the latter, written around 1195, seem to refer to Maimonides’ *Letter on Astrology* and suggest that R. Jonathan fully understood its anti-astrological message:

כתבת לנו שלישים בְּמַעֲצוֹת וְדַעַת, לַצְפִּירַת תַּפְאֶרֶת וְעֵטְרַת וּמַגְבַּעַת, אוֹתוֹת
בְּדִים הַפְּרַת בְּאוֹתוֹתֶיךָ, וּמוֹפְתֵי קוֹסְמִים הוֹלֵלַת בְּמוֹפְתֶיךָ, וְהוֹבְרֵי שָׁמַיִם הוֹבֵשֶׁת
בְּשִׁמְיֶיךָ מַעֲשֵׂה אֲצִבְעוֹתֶיךָ, נוֹפֶפֶת עֲלֵינוּ טֶלֶךְ, וְשִׁלַּחַת אֶל עַמְךָ נִדְבוֹת בְּיוֹם
חֵילֶךָ.¹⁷¹

Translation: You have written to us excellent things in counsels and knowledge (Prov. 22:20), for a diadem of beauty and for a crown (after Isa. 28:5) and a turban; with your signs you have frustrated the signs of the impostors and with your wonders you have thwarted the wonders of the diviners (after Isa. 44:25); with your

heavens, the work of your fingers (Psalms 8:4), you have shamed the astrologers (Isa. 47:13); you have sprinkled your dew over us, and you have sent offerings to your people on the day of thy battle (after Psalms 110:3).

§ 27

[55] **Be not worried by the experience of the astrologers.** “The chaste” (*ba-ṣenu^cim*), continuing from §26, express their concern about astrology in a way that is reminiscent of the criticism of astrology in §§4, 5, 6, and 18. They employ the distinctive expression

notes under the editorship of I. Epstein (The Soncino Press: London, 1936), p. 362, n. 3. See also *Talmud Bavli, Tractate Kiddushin* (The Schottenstein Edition: New York, 1998), p. 71a³, wherein *ṣanua^c* is translated as “discreet.”

¹⁶⁸ For a short biography, see I. Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 247–250; I.M. Ta-Shma, “Jonathan ha-Kohen,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971/72), 10:186. For his role in the Resurrection Controversy, see B. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 42–44.

¹⁶⁹ A. Marx (*Correspondence*, p. 333) considered R. Jonathan ha-Kohen to be the center of the circle of Provençal scholars who sent *Queries* to Maimonides. Cf. Sonne, “Maimonides’ Epistle,” p. 141. As S.D. Goitein has demonstrated, an active civilian postal system regularly functioned across the Mediterranean in the twelfth century (Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* 1: 191, 281–295, 305).

¹⁷⁰ A. Marx, who studied their correspondence, has shown that if R. Jonathan ha-Kohen and the scholars of Lunel were not initially held in high esteem by Maimonides, they gradually gained his respect and admiration after their correspondence turned to halakhic issues (Marx, “Correspondence,” pp. 325–335; Sonne, “Maimonides’ Epistle,” pp. 136–146).

¹⁷¹ Letter from R. Jonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel to Maimonides, quoted from *Moses ben Maimon Responsa*, ed. Alfred Freimann (Jerusalem, 1934), p. LVI. On this passage, see Sonne, “Maimonides’ Epistle,” pp. 140–141; Shailat, *Letters*, 2:492).

“experiences of the astrologers” (נסיונות חכמי המזלות) to refer to the astrologers’ claim that their science is based on accumulated experience rather than on deduction from theoretical principles.¹⁷² This suggests that they requested a separate reply not only because of their qualms about the indelicate character of one of the queries but also because they did not share the view of those who accepted the utility of astrology.

§ 29

[56] You informed the community of Fez of those things. See above, §1, n. 2.

Conclusion

Astrological Sources

The sources of *Queries* are Jewish astrological or astrologically related texts, written in Hebrew or Aramaic, from four different historical periods. These four layers are interrelated and offer an essentially ambiguous and dualistic view of astrology:

(a) **Twelfth century.** This layer, by far the most important one, derives from the work of Abraham Ibn Ezra, whose pervasive influence on *Queries* may be observed in verbatim quotations (§§3, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16, 24, and 25) or paraphrases (§§3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 24) from his works and in elliptical references to earlier astrological sources mentioned in them.¹⁷³ Abraham Bar Ḥiyya’s influence on *Queries* is limited to a few astronomical and astrological terms (see above §2, n. 6; §4, n. 16; §5, n. 18; §11, n. 33; §24, n. 50; §25, n. 51). This can be explained by the subsidiary role that astrology played in Bar Ḥiyya’s writings.¹⁷⁴ Although the astrological doctrines mentioned in *Queries* are closely related to the work of Arab astrologers, there are no direct references to Arabic astrological texts. This is because the Provençal scholars could

not read Arabic¹⁷⁵ and received technical astrological information already couched in Hebrew terms, thanks to Ibn Ezra’s astrological treatises.

At least some of the Provençal scholars knew that Ibn Ezra was their main astrological source, as is evident from the fact that they not only quoted his texts but also made two references to their author, albeit without mentioning his name (see §24, n. 49; §25, n. 52); what is more, Ibn Ezra does not hide his identity in *Sefer ha-moladot* and *Sefer ha-šeʿelot*, the two works most frequently quoted in *Queries*.¹⁷⁶ The writers seem to have been acquainted with the full texts of Ibn Ezra’s astrological works, given that they perused them carefully for appropriate passages—e.g., in §8, where they inserted no fewer than seventeen excerpts from various parts of *Sefer ha-moladot*.

Why, given their heavy reliance on Ibn Ezra’s astrological works, do the Provençal scholars avoid referring to him by name? The refer-

¹⁷² Note too that the writers use the new Hebrew expression (חכמי המזלות) coined by Abraham Ibn Ezra to refer to astrologers (see above, §7, n. 25).

¹⁷³ We notice references to “those who speak wisely” (§3), “the scholars” (§§6, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 24, and 25), “the astrologers” (§§7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 21, 25, 27), “the books of the scholars” (§§7, 10, 11), and “the books of the astrologers” (§24).

¹⁷⁴ Besides the letter to Rabbi Judah b. Barzilai of Barcelona and some astrological references in his astronomical work, Bar Ḥiyya’s main contribution in this field is limited to the fifth and last chapter of *Megillat ha-Megalleh*. This work deals with macro-astrology and therefore is not concerned with the astrology of the individual, the topic that preoccupied the Provençal scholars. For Bar Ḥiyya’s astrological work, see Sela, *Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 101–104.

¹⁷⁵ They were presumably the promoters of the translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* from Arabic into Hebrew. See Marx, “Correspondence,” p. 330. However, their acquaintance with the theory of the Muslim philosopher (§14) indicates that they were not disconnected from astrological ideas emerging directly from Arabic civilization.

¹⁷⁶ *Moladot*, fol. 46b; *Šeʿelot A*, fols. 62b, 63a.

ences to Ibn Ezra in §§24–25 (“one scholar,” “our Rabbi, of blessed memory”) give the impression that the reason is their familiarity with Abraham Ibn Ezra, who had passed through their country forty years earlier and to whom they still felt indebted, as may be appreciated by the extent of the quotations from his work. But some of the Provençal scholars may also have had some reservations about astrology or about Ibn Ezra’s astrological ideas. Ultimately, the reason remains a puzzle.

(b) **Geonic period.** This layer consists of a lengthy excerpt from a responsum written by Sherira Gaon and Hai Gaon, which divides astrologers into two groups, one endorsing a hard, and the other a soft, version of astrology. Both the included and the excluded parts of the responsum are significant with regard to the astrological sources of *Queries*: whereas the excluded section includes the two main talmudic sources of *Queries* (B Shabbat 156a and Mo^ced Qatan 28a), the fragment that the Provençal scholars chose to insert in their letter is the one commented and expanded on by Ibn Ezra in the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* (see above, §2, n. 5; §3, n. 13).

(c) **Talmudic period.** This layer is represented by a passage from Shabbat 156a (§2, §6) and a quote from Mo^ced Qatan 28a (§6), included in *Queries* to convey respectively the soft and hard versions of astrology (see above §2, n. 4; §6, n. 24). There is also a citation of a third talmudic passage (Bava Meši^ca³ 42a), devoid of any astrological significance in the Talmud; it is incorporated in three different places (§§4, 6, and 12) to sound an alert against the dangers that astrology may pose to religious practice.

(d) **Biblical period.** In §2 the astrologers are referred to as “those who gaze at the stars” (Isa. 47:13). The use of this designation implies a tacit admission that astrology could trace its roots back to biblical times. On the other hand, in §6 there is a reference to several unspecified verses of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, invoked to buttress a presumably anti-astrology argument.

Date and Structure

The *terminus ante quem* for *Queries* seems to be 1193, the year when the *Mishneh Torah* reached Provence.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the Provençal scholars do not refer to Maimonides’ *Code*, which was at the core of their later correspondence.¹⁷⁸ Since *Queries* is the last in a series of letters that the same group of scholars from southern France sent to Maimonides but which had remained unanswered (§24),¹⁷⁹ such a date for *Queries* also implies that the correspondence between Provence and Maimonides about astrology commenced some years earlier.

The fact that in §26 Maimonides is requested to reply to a separate subject in a confidential letter and that §24, which opens the discussion about this separate subject, is preceded by a long indentation, strongly suggests that §§24–29 are a distinct part of *Queries*. I would explain this structure of *Queries* as follows:

Queries was divided into two parts because it includes a subject that the writers judged to be indelicate and embarrassing—how to choose a propitious moment for conception.¹⁸⁰ For this specific purpose, the writers refer to themselves in §26 as “the chaste” (*ba-šenu^cim*).

¹⁷⁷ See Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁸ Moreover, Maimonides himself, in his reply, assumes that neither his *Code* nor the *Guide of the Perplexed* (which had not yet been translated into Hebrew) has reached them (Marx, “Correspondence,” §3, p. 349; §8 p. 351).

¹⁷⁹ Maimonides himself, in his reply, seems to acknowledge this fact by invoking in his defense his many occupations and lack of time. Moreover, he admits there that had he not been urged “till he was ashamed,” he would not have replied to the present letter, either (Marx, “Correspondence,” pp. 357–358).

¹⁸⁰ It is not completely clear whether this subject, alluded to at the beginning of §24, was one of the “points that were not in the others” or one of the issues that had been included in the earlier letters, of which the writers state that they “are not sure whether Maimonides would deem it possible to respond.” Marx believed that this query originated in an earlier letter (Marx, “Correspondence,” p. 318).

The first part of *Queries*, by contrast, is a letter written to be sent to Maimonides in the manner usual for this kind of writings, i.e., with no need for confidentiality and the attendant expectation that it would be diffused widely. Here the Provençal scholars recycled material from queries sent to Maimonides in previous letters. This part of *Queries* runs from §1 to §23: §1 consists of the customary salutation; the queries on astrology are developed in §2 through §20; §21 through §23 are the conclusion, which includes a summary of the main queries posed (§21) and a conventional closing that praises the addressee and asks him to acknowledge and respond to their letter (§§22–23).

The second part, §24 to §29, was presumably written on a separate sheet and sealed, perhaps with a superscription to the effect that it was confidential. The “delicate” subject is developed in §§24–25; §26 contains the request that Maimonides respond to this question under separate cover to a specified address; in §27 the authors ask for Maimonides’ forbearance should he consider they had done something unworthy; §28 is the complimentary close, though in a very abridged form (compare §§18–20). Finally, §29 is a postscript.

We thus have a single epistle whose authors viewed it as consisting of two distinct parts—one dealing with “decent” topics, open to the general public, the other with an “indelicate” theme, to be discussed only by “the chaste.” At a later stage, the two parts of the letter were copied one after the other, although even in the manuscript that has come down to us a long indentation still indicates that *Queries* originally consisted of two separate documents.

The Writers and their Message

The writers of *Queries* are presented in §2 as a homogeneous group (*ḥavurah*). Given, however, that they were thoroughly acquainted with some of Ibn Ezra’s astrological works, we may wonder why they state, in §18, that their knowledge of astrology is based on “things we have heard.” This seems to break the cohesiveness of the *ḥavurah* and

indicates that more than one voice may be heard in *Queries*, as might be expected in the collective composition of a group of scholars concerned about an essentially ambiguous view of astrology. I would suggest that there were two main groups among the writers, each of them conveying a specific message to Maimonides in both parts of *Queries*.

The first group includes persons who were acquainted with the details of some of Ibn Ezra’s astrological books, although they suppressed his name. The voice of this group is clearly heard in §3, which includes a verbatim quotation from the introduction to *Sefer ha-moladot* (see above, §3, n. 13); in §8, which is made up of at least seventeen brief excerpts from all parts of *Sefer ha-moladot* (see above §8, n. 28); in §§10–11, where they drew on *Sefer ha-moladot* and *Rešit ḥokmah* for technical information about the third and fourth horoscopic houses (see §10, n. 31; §11, n. 32); in §15, which includes a long word-for-word quotation from the introduction to *Sefer ha-se’elot* (see above §15, n. 43), and in §24 (in the second part of *Queries*), which includes another long verbatim quotation from *Sefer ha-moladot* (see above §24, n. 48).

Based on these sources, the first group admits that astrology may be trustworthy. This is noticeable in both parts of *Queries* (§§10, 11, 13, 15, and 24): First they present some astrological doctrine and then focus on a problematic though highly technical characteristic thereof. They do not reject the possibility that astrologers may be of benefit in protecting the planet-stricken. Hence a major issue that occupies a significant part of the letter (§§7–13) is the means and extent to which astrologers can help foretell calamities and thus avert the baneful affect of the stars. They also earnestly try to find a way to harmonize this soft version of astrology with religious belief and practice (see above, §9, n. 29; §12, n. 35). Through oblique references to Ibn Ezra’s writings (“the books of the scholars,” “the books of the astrologers”), in §§7, 11, and 17 they also voice a complaint that is not always confined to purely

religious or moral issues but also refers to the confusing way in which the technical details are presented in these books (see above, §11, n. 34; §17, n. 45).

The voice of the second group is clearly heard in §18, where, in sharp contrast to the first group, we read that they had not read any book on astrology, had not studied astrology, and never “walk in the path of these sciences,” so that their minimal knowledge of astrology is based on mere hearsay. They unleash a strong attack on the hard version of astrology in both parts of *Queries*: In §4 they construe astrological determinism as inducing people to consider all prayer to be futile (see above, §4, n. 17);¹⁸¹ in §16 the astrologers’ presumption that they can predict unnatural death is viewed as destroying the foundations of faith and annulling the effect of prayers (see above, §6, nn. 22 and 24); and in §27 they resume their attack on astrology when they ask Maimonides to show them the path, so that they will “be not worried by the experience of the astrologers” (see above §27, n. 55).

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¹⁸¹ In contrast, the followers of the first position presume in §12 that prayers may be helpful if there is “utility and succor” in knowing one’s astrologically ordained lot by asking the opinion of the astrologer (see above, §12, n. 35).