**Abraham Ibn Ezra**

**and his Ambivalent Approach Towards his Sources**

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**1. Introduction**

Abraham Ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–ca. 1161) was one of the most prolific writers in Medieval Jewry, a biblical commentator, and a pioneer of medieval Hebrew science. He was born and educated in Muslim Spain, where he spent the first five decades of his life, apparently supporting himself as an itinerant poet. The bulk of his literary work, however, was produced only after he left the Iberian Peninsula and began his wanderings through Italy, Provence, France, and England. While sojourning in these places, Ibn Ezra wrote prolifically on a wide variety of subjects, and almost exclusively in Hebrew. He is well-known for his outstanding biblical commentaries, but his literary corpus also includes works on arithmetic, astronomy, grammar, the Jewish calendar and especially astrology. In fact, Abraham Ibn Ezra composed no less than 20 astrological treatises, which cover all branches of medieval astrology, i.e., introduction to astrology, nativities, continuous horoscopy in nativities, elections, interrogations, world astrology and medical astrology. His work in this field is the most important contribution to astrology ever made by a Jewish scholar. Ibn Ezra’s intellectual interest in the sciences is also reflected in his biblical commentaries, in which he embeds not a few scientific notions and doctrines. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s writings are among the first to discuss Greco-Arabic science in the Hebrew language, and they contributed a great deal to the development of Hebrew scientific vocabulary and to the transmission of scientific knowledge to the Jews of Latin Europe.

During his years of wandering, Ibn Ezra gathered students and patrons around him and generated\raised interest among\across various Jewish circles. The rapid diffusion of both his scientific and exegetic writings is indicated, *inter alia*, by the very early references to his works. His biblical commentaries were used as source material for Joseph Qimḥi and his son David Qimḥi, and in 1170, a decade after Ibn Ezra’s death, for Jacob ben Reuben’s *Milẖamot ha-Shem*. Later in the twelfth century, a group of Provençal Jews addressed a letter with a series of queries on astrology to Maimonides, deriving their astrological knowledge from Ibn Ezra’s astrological works (Sela 2004). In the thirteenth century, his astrological corpus was used as source material for several works, such as the astrological section of Levi ben Abraham’s *Livyat ḥen* (Garshtein 2021, 189–197, 413–428), and the anonymous compendium known as *Sefer ha-Kolel* (Sela 2014b; Garshtein 2024). Toward the end of the thirteenth century, Ibn Ezra’s astrological writings were transmitted to a Christian audience via a series of translation projects, which were carried out almost simultaneously. In 1273, a Jewish scholar named Hagin le Juif was commissioned by Henry Bate of Mechelen (1246–after 1310) to translate some of Ibn Ezra’s astrological works into Old French. Four of Hagin’s translations are extant today in two unique manuscripts (Sela 2021). Old French translations were used as source materials by later scholars – such as Henry Bate, Pietro d’Abano (ca. 1250–ca. 1315), Pierre de Limoges (second half of the thirteenth century), and Arnoul de Quincampoix (d. before 1336) – who in turn translated Ibn Ezra’s work into Latin. Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries continued to attain recognition in the late Middle Ages, and their popularity in Jewish circles begot a new literary genre – supercommentaries on his biblical exegesis.

**2. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Skeptical Approach towards Two of his Chief Sources**

Abraham ibn Ezra adopted a highly critical stance towards his predecessors. When faced with what he perceived as inaccuracies or misconceptions, be they advocated by traditional authorities or scientific figures – whether Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Karaite, Persian or Indian – Ibn Ezra did not hesitate to express his disapproval with severe words. For instance, in his *Book on Nativities* he refers derisively to a certain scholar who included in his book tables for determining life expectancy which this scholar called “ovens”. Ibn Ezra dismissed and scorned the significance of these “ovens” with the following ridiculing statement: “they deserve to be burnt in an oven, because they are nonsense”. [Sela 2014a, 114–115].

Numerous instances illustrating Ibn Ezra’s critical disposition are scattered throughout both his exegetical and scientific works. Here, however, I would like to focus on Ibn Ezra’s somewhat ambivalent stance towards two of his chief scientific sources – Abū Maʿshar (787-886) and Ptolemy (2nd Century). While Ibn Ezra extensively relies on their works and frequently expresses his admiration for these two famous authorities, he does not hesitate to criticize them and, at times, launch direct attacks on both [scientists]. The first version of Ibn Ezra’s *Book of the World* begins with the following blunt statement: “If you come across Abū Maʿshar’s *Book on the Conjunctions of the Planets* you would neither like it nor trust it […]. No scholar concurs with him”. Towards the end of his treatise Ibn Ezra adds:

Abū Maʿshar said that many times he had verified by experience that if Mars is in one of Saturn’s houses at the beginning of the year it signifies drought. […] I do not know the reason for that; I too tried to verify it by experience but was unsuccessful. This is why I have told you this, so that you will not trust his [=Abū Maʿshar’s] book if you find it. (Sela 2010, 92–93).

Ibn Ezra’s skeptical attitude is well manifested by the strategy he used to undermine Abū Maʿshar’s theory. Ibn Ezra testified that he had put Abū Maʿshar’s theory to [the?] test using his own experience, and the empirical data he collected was not aligned with the prediction of Abū Maʿshar’s thesis. These attacks on Abū Maʿshar – the most prominent astrologer of the Middle Ages – are of much surprise, as Ibn Ezra consistently drew on Abū Maʿshar’s work throughout his astrological corpus. Indeed, these allegations also surprised Henry Bate, the first scholar to bring Ibn Ezra’s astrological work to the knowledge of Latin readers. Bate opens his translation of Ibn Ezra’s first version of the *Book of the World* with a long prologue, which aims to refute Ibn Ezra’s criticism of Abū Maʿshar. He opens his prologue by expressing his bewilderment:

When we started working on the translation of Ibn Ezra’s *Treatise on the Conjunctions of the Planets and the Revolutions of the Years of the World*, we were indeed shocked at the opening of the text, as we did not understand why [Ibn Ezra] failed to pay respect to the prince of the astrologers – Abū Maʿshar. (Sela 2022a, 934–935).

It should be noted that while Ibn Ezra was indeed critical towards Abū Maʿshar’s work on world astrology, he took a completely different approach towards Abū Maʿshar’s works on other branches of astrology, such as introduction to astrology, elections, and interrogations. (See, e.g., Sela 2011, 272-273, §7.4:1-5).

Ibn Ezra’s ambivalence toward his sources becomes even more pronounced when we examine his attitude towards Ptolemy. On the one hand, he frequently expresses explicit admiration for Ptolemy, aligning himself with a broad spectrum of his notions concerning central astronomical, mathematical, and astrological subjects. At times, Ibn Ezra uses and embeds Ptolemy’s ideas and data into his biblical commentaries (Sela 2003, Part Five). On the other hand, Ibn Ezra often points out what he perceives as calculation errors in Ptolemy’s work, states that Ptolemy’s astronomical tables are irrelevant in his days and rejects some of his astrological doctrines. Although Ibn Ezra refers to Ptolemy as one of the two leading astrologers (Sela 2011, 348–349), his major criticism is directed towards Ptolemy’s astrology: “I now give a general rule”, he writes in the first version of his *Book of Reasons*, “anything that Ptolemy says about the orbs is correct […] but his [astrological] decrees and judgments do not befit his wisdom” (Sela 2007, 58–59). His harsh attack is directed specifically towards Ptolemy’s seminal astrological work – his *Tetrabiblos*. In his *Book on Nativities*, while referring explicitly to the *Tetrabiblos*, Ibn Ezra asserts: “All those who followed him [=Ptolemy], including Masha’allah, laugh at him. And they are right [in doing so]. I have told you this so that you will not trust everything in this book [=the *Tetrabiblos*], because it has no substance” (Sela 2014a, 144–145). In a different occasion\instance, what aroused Ibn Ezra’s attack was the *Tetrabiblos*’ attribution of the four Aristotelian qualities – heat, cold, dryness, and moistness – to the planets. Such attribution led Ibn Ezra to put into question the authorship over his\of[?]the *Tetrabiblos*:

But I, Abraham, the author, say that this book [=*Tetrabiblos*] was not written by Ptolemy, because there are many things in it that have in them nothing of rational thought or experience, as I shall explain. (Sela 2007, 34–35).

The two examples of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s critical stance towards Abū Maʿshar and Ptolemy serve as representative examples that testify to a broader phenomenon: Ibn Ezra’s readiness to scrutinize and challenge authorities in various domains, be they traditional, religious or scientific [figures?].

**3. Open Questions**

* Abraham Ibn Ezra spent his first fifty years in the Iberian Peninsula, while his surviving literary works were produced only after he left to Christian Europe. What were his main pursuits during the initial five decades of his life? Did he produce any exegetical or scientific works during this time?
* It seems that Abraham Ibn Ezra authored some of his works directly in Latin, possibly with the assistance of a Christian scholar. Were these writings his own initiatives, or was he perhaps commissioned to do so? In which language did he communicate with his Christian fellows?
* Abraham Ibn Ezra’s interests also extended to astronomy. He composed sets of astronomical tables and conducted at least two astronomical observations during his time in Italy. To what extent did he rely on and use his own empirical observations in his scholarly pursuits? Did he ascribe importance to empirical data as a vital means of critically examining scientific theories?
* Ibn Ezra’s reputation in the Jewish world rests mostly on his biblical commentaries. From the end of the thirteenth century to the end of the Middle Ages, scholars produced supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra’s biblical exegeses. **While Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic writing style likely played a role in the development of this new literary genre, what other intellectual, cultural, or religious factors might have motivated scholars to write these supercommentaries?**
* The translation projects of Abraham Ibn Ezra’s astrological writings into Latin, which occurred almost simultaneously in the late thirteenth century, mark what has been termed the “Abraham Ibn Ezra Renaissance in the Latin West”. In recent years, Shlomo Sela has devoted significant effort to examining this phenomenon, publishing critical editions and English translations of many of the Latin translations of Ibn Ezra’s astrological writings (or writings ascribed to Ibn Ezra) as part of his important Brill series Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Astrological Writings. While Sela’s work has made substantial contributions, further research is still needed to fully understand the motivations behind this “renaissance”. Why did Christian scholars find it important to translate, read, and study Ibn Ezra’s astrological works? Who were the intended audience for these translations? What was the precise role and impact of these translations in the diffusion and assimilation of astrological knowledge in\within the scholarly circles in medieval Christian Europe?

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