

The Astrology of Abraham Ibn Ezra: Planets at Perigee and Apogee Strength and Weakness of the Planet in its Own Wheel

Meira Epstein, C.A., NCGR-PAA

A fundamental principle in reading the astrological chart is evaluating Strength and Weakness of the planets. One of the considerations is whether the planet is found in its Apogee or Perigee.

This consideration is rooted in Ptolemy's cosmology, but received attention later, starting in the Arabic era. Abraham Ibn Ezra, as a transmitter of this tradition, gives us a thorough understanding of this technique.

Astrological Strength and Weakness

In general, we can say that this principle is first presented, either fully or just mentioned, in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, then elaborated in *The Book of Reasons*, and then applied in *The Book of Nativities*, *The Book of Elections* and *The Book of Interrogations*. Even *The Book on the Astrolabe* needs to be reviewed for this purpose. In most cases it is necessary to track it throughout all the books in order to fully encompass the subject.

The concept of planetary strength and weakness is fundamental to astrology, and affects every type of chart evaluation an astrologer is called upon to perform. Such considerations are pervasive throughout the astrological works of Ibn Ezra. In addition to the well-known five essential dignities, throughout his books Ibn Ezra provides an extensive list of factors that affect the strength, the choice and analysis of a significator planet:

- Sign placement - essential dignity-debility
- Motion
- Position in its own wheel and relation to the earth & the ecliptic
- Relation to the ecliptic - latitude
- Relation to the horizon - above-below the earth
- House placement
- Mundane quadrants
- Solar phase
- The planets' elevation - inferior-superior
- The planets' essential, intrinsic character and malefic-benefic
- Gender agreement - by sign, quadrant and day-night
- Aspects relationship

'Strength based on the planet's position in its own wheel' is the least known, nor used, even by astrologers who are interested in the classical material:

Before getting into this topic a brief astronomical explanation is in order. Two terms are used to define the position of a planet in relation with the earth:

Apogee - when a planet is the furthest from the Earth.

From the geocentric view, when the outer planets (Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) are at *Perigee*, they are retrograde and in opposition to the Sun, and at *Apogee* they are direct in motion and in conjunction with the Sun. (figure 1)

Perigee - when the planet is the closest to the Earth.

From the geocentric view, when the inner planets (Mercury, Venus) are at *Perigee*, they are retrograde and in an inferior conjunction with the Sun, and at *Apogee* they are direct in motion and in a superior conjunction with the Sun. (figure 2)

Figure 1

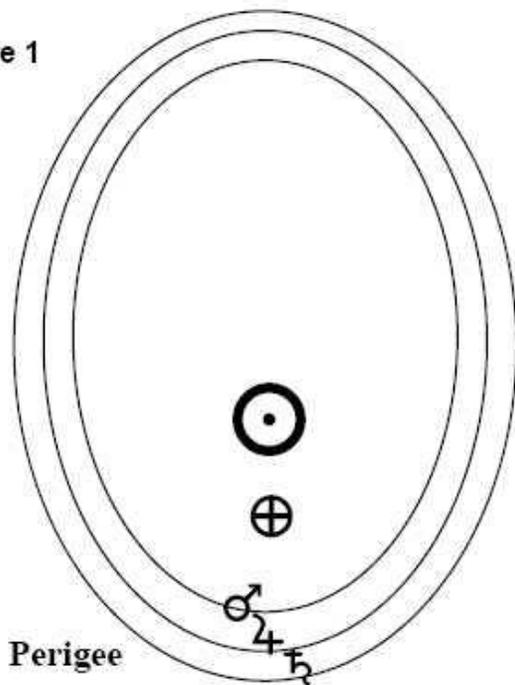
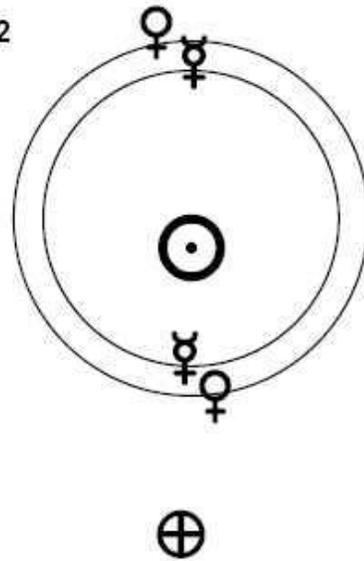
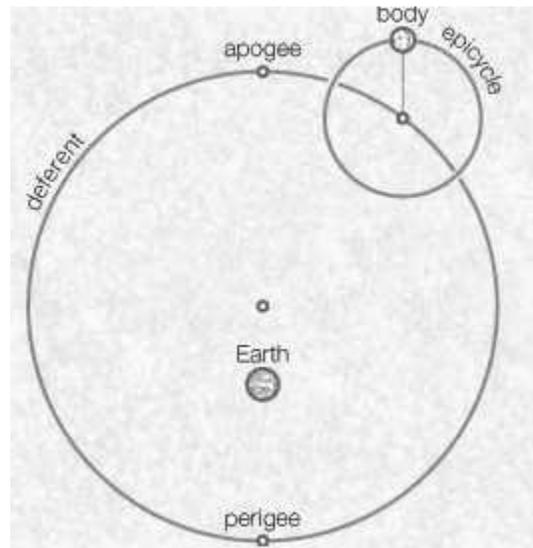


Figure 2



An obvious conclusion is that when a planet, whether superior or inferior, is in its closer position to the earth it is retrograde, and when further away it is direct.



In the Ptolemaic geocentric model the retrograde motion is explained by the Deferent and the Epicycle: The Deferent is the planet's principal orbit. The planet moves in the Epicycle, which is a smaller circle carried along on top of this Deferent. See figure 3.

The earth is not at the center of the deferent. The part of the Deferent that is farthest from the Earth is called the *Auge*, (pronounced a'ou'ge) an Anglicized version of the Arabic *awj*, and is the equivalent of the *Apogee*. In this model the planet can be far from the earth by virtue of its Deferent position and additionally by its Epicycle position - sort of a "double *Auge*".

Another concept must be kept in mind: Planetary orbits were conceived not as flat horizontal concentric circles as modern astronomical models depicts them but as spheres within spheres, and when further away from the earth they are reaching higher up towards the heavens. In other words, it is not only about distance from the earth but also about elevation – lower or higher. Thus, a planet in its orbital motion is seen as 'ascending' or 'descending' in its wheels in more than one way. Further differentiation comes from the quadrant placement in the wheel.

This type of elevation and motion also becomes a consideration in assessments of strength & weakness, as well as in matters of the physical plane vs. the noetic or soul level. Incorporating this technique into astrology seems to begin in the Arabic era, as noted by R. Hand in Abu Ma'shar's *Abbreviation*.

Next we see how this concept is referred to and assigned an interpretive value by Ibn Ezra in his three major works.

The Beginning of Wisdom

In Chapter Two, which covers the twelve zodiacal signs, we find the current inferior or superior degree position of a planet, (*Auge* or its opposite), if found in the sign. Example, under Aries: '...the inferior position of Mercury at 25 degrees at the present time in the year 4908.'

In Chapter Five we find a total list of planetary conditions, one of which is strength 'when the planet ascends in the wheel of elevation and descent, whose solid [sphere] is distant from the solid [sphere] of the earth.'

In Chapter Six, under a listing of all the circumstances of planetary motions, we find more technical details:

- 'A planet may be ascending in the wheel of elevation or descending in it, or at the beginning of the elevation, or descending from the middle of the wheel towards its nadir, or ascending from its nadir to the middle of the wheel, or at its nadir.' 'When a planet is 90 degrees away from the beginning of its elevation then it is direct in its motion and the reason is that it is [in an] intermediate [position], and so is its light and the strength of its body. When a planet is less than 90 degrees away from the beginning of its elevation and moving towards it then it is ascending [in the wheel] and decreases in its motion and light and strength of body. When it is in its place of elevation then the decrease is complete, and when it descends from the its elevation towards [the point of] its half-wheel then it increases in motion and light and strength of body; When it descends from that half-wheel towards its nadir it also increases in all [its attributes]. When it is in its nadir then it increases in all of these completely.'

In Chapter Eight, which deals with Inquiries, Nativities and Revolutions, we find an interpretive statement in the form of a metaphor for position of superiority, authority and dominance: 'A planet in its elevation is like a person on his horse.' In other words, not lowly and walking the road.

The Book of Reasons

Under the topic of 'The Order of Strength' we find clear attribution to body vs. soul. The term 'fixed circle' is the deferent and the 'small circle' is the epicycle:

- 'When a planet is in its high position it is close to the zodiac wheel, and is like a soul, and when it is in its low position it is closer to the Earth which is like a body that is the vessel for the soul, for the body is a vessel.
- Regarding a planet ascending in the small circle whose fixed sphere is far from that of the Earth, there is a difference between the Hindu astrologers and Ptolemy. The Hindu astrologers say that when a planet is in the high position, it is like a man riding on his horse, whereas in the low position it is like the slave walking on the road. Ptolemy says that when a planet is closer to the Earth, it is much stronger, and the opposite when it is further away.
- In my opinion, both are correct, because when a planet is far from the Earth, it receives much strength from the superior ones, and if it rules the affairs of the soul, which is superior, then the native will have exceptional wisdom in all

matters, and if it rules bodily affairs, he will be short and skinny and will not have sufficient strength.

- If the planet is in its low position and rules the soul it indicates that the native will be foolish and ignorant, and if it rules the body it indicates a big and strong body.'

The following discussion on the Conjunction is in the context of assessing which party will prevail in a conflict situation when the ruler of the 1st house conjoins the ruler of the 7th house.

The quoted passage here is limited to our current topic. The book has an extensive list of structured considerations and their scoring weights:

- '*Application [to Conjunction]*. Astrologers say that the beginning of a conjunction is 15 degrees, but Ptolemy said that it is according to the orb of light of the planet, before or after it, and that is correct in my view. What is said about the light [planet] occulting the heavy one is true when the conjunction is in longitude and latitude, and all that it indicates will come true. And this is how you do it: Look to see if the two planets are on the Ecliptic – this is a true conjunction. If you wish to know which one is stronger, look to see whose wheel is higher – the bigger prevails over the smaller one, and this counts as 4. The one that is at the elevation of its small circle prevails over the other by a count of 3. When you calculate all those counts of strength you will know which one prevails.

The Book of Nativities

In the chapter on the Seventh House, under 'Quarrels' we need to determine 'who will win' in the situation of a conjunction between the rules of the 1st and the 7th houses. The following judgments come after all other strengths & weaknesses have been exhausted. Both the deferent and the epicycle are considered:

- 'If the ruler of the nativity and the ruler of the seventh house are conjoined and you wish to know who will win, look to see which of the planets is closer to its elevated position vis-a-vis the solid wheel; it will overcome the one that is distant from its elevated position.
- Likewise, also observe [which] one of them is closer to its elevated position in the small wheel (the epicycle) for it will overcome the lower one.'

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