

# INTRODUCTION

## *§1: Sahl and Māshā'allāh*

The sixteen works translated in this volume were written by two of the most important and famous astrologers in the Arabic period of traditional astrology, Sahl bin Bishr and Māshā'allāh bin Atharī (or simply Māshā'allāh). Little is known about their biographies, but both were Jews of Persian descent working in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD, and many of the works here were fundamental for later astrologers, who quoted them often (and sometimes copied their work without attribution). Some of these works have never been translated into any modern language; for others, it is their first English translation; for yet others, these are updated English translations based on cross-referencing between all of the works and access to some critical editions in Arabic. Collected together for the first time, they represent a huge contribution to astrological theory and practice, and will prove to be of great benefit to modern astrologers interested in traditional thought and techniques.

Māshā'allāh's<sup>1</sup> work represents some of the most important work to be produced in the early Arabic period. He was born in ca. 740 AD in Basra, Iraq, and died ca. 815 AD. As a young man he participated in a team of astrologers who cast the electional chart for the foundation of Baghdad for Caliph Al-Mansūr (dated July 31, 762), along with Nawbakht the Persian and 'Umar al-Tabarī. His output was large, covering at least 28 works by Pingree's count, but since some of the larger Arabic works were divided up and copied in smaller chunks, it is hard to know their exact number. An additional problem is that most of his work survives only in Latin, and other works are lost altogether.

Māshā'allāh represents a period in which Indian and Persian astrological practices were consciously informed with Hellenistic ones (primarily from Ptolemy and Dorotheus). From the Indian and Persian side there are mainly works of mundane astrology, and from the Hellenistic side there are nativities and elections. But as I will point out below, Māshā'allāh's writings also

---

<sup>1</sup> My biographical information is based primarily on Holden 1996 and Pingree 1974.

include both what we would recognize as traditional horary astrology, and an earlier type which casts “consultation” charts to divine the client’s intention.

As we look from our perspective at long-term influences in astrology, it is perhaps not too much of an overstatement to say that true medieval astrology begins with Māshā’allāh, or at least with his circle. For reasons of Islamic imperial politics, the effort to translate other scientific materials into Arabic, and through the influence of his pupil Abu ‘Ali (whose *Judgments of Nativities* was so important to the medieval Latins), Māshā’allāh stood at the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, and his name and work were well-known and respected. It is a shame that so little of his work has been translated into modern languages. Apart from the eleven works translated here, there are approximately 6-10 others in Latin which should be translated in the future. According to Pingree, some of the works attributed to Māshā’allāh also appear in the list for Abū Ma’shar, so there is some dispute about authorship.

Sahl bin Bishr, known better by the Latinized names *Zael* or *Zabel*, was a Persian Jew who flourished in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. So he was a contemporary of Māshā’allāh’s, and while he knows Māshā’allāh’s work, we do not know if they ever met. From the sources I have consulted, we know next to nothing about him, but Stegemann says he was an attendant of al-Hasan, the vizier under the Caliph al-Ma’mun, in Khurasan.

If Māshā’allāh and his circle formed the true beginning of medieval astrology from a linguistic and cultural-contribution perspective, Sahl’s work stands out as a kind of reader-friendly repackaging of traditional material which made his work extremely influential for many centuries. His *Introduction* is notable for its list of technical terms, which reappears again and again in various forms in later astrologers’ works. His clear principles of horary and electional astrology, the topics covered and his delineations, are all drawn on by later astrologers. (Māshā’allāh’s own horary methods were not as popular as Sahl’s.) His *Fifty Judgments* is a collection of handy sayings and principles which are reflected in both style and content in works by ibn Ezra, Bonatti, and collections of centiloquys. Two works I have not included in this volume (for various reasons) are his work on the magical use of precious stones, and a work on mundane astrology and weather prediction, known in Latin as the *Fatidica* or “Prophetic Sayings.”

§2: *Stegemann and Dorotheus*

In 1939 and 1942, two books on ancient and medieval astrology were published by the German scholar and philologist Viktor Stegemann. The first was his attempt at reconstructing the transmission and authentic work of Dorotheus from whatever Latin, Arabic, and Greek quotations and summaries he could find.<sup>2</sup> Stegemann already believed that much medieval natal and electional astrology is based on only a few sources, chief among them Dorotheus. In 1942 he continued work on this thesis, publishing a critical Arabic, Greek, and Latin edition (with German translations of the Arabic) of Sahl's *Introduct.* §5, the list of technical terms with explanations and some examples.<sup>3</sup> Through references to the *CCAG* and other sources, and drawing on his Dorotheus work, Stegemann felt justified in his earlier belief about the centrality of Dorotheus to the medieval tradition.

Stegemann was more right than perhaps he knew. As the reader will see in my footnotes, I have cited, wherever possible and obvious, the passages in Pingree's *Carmen* on which Sahl depends. It turns out that principles and passages from Dorotheus form part or even a large bulk of material from *Introduct.*, *On Quest.*, *On Elect.*, and the *Fifty Judgments*. But as I mentioned before, Sahl's ability to reorganize and repackage, and to isolate theoretical statements from exposition, allowed him to reshape much of this material in a form recognizable as medieval astrology today. In fact, based on Stegemann and the translations in this book, it seems to me that pretty much all medieval astrology can be boiled down to three or four central books or types of books. The first two are real and known: Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* and Dorotheus's *Carmen*.<sup>4</sup> We could add to this a hypothetical Persian-style work on mundane astrology (perhaps even Māshā'allāh's own work *On Conjunctions, Religions, and Peoples*), and possibly another work on horary. If we had all three or four of these books (even apart from other sources like Valens and Antio-

---

<sup>2</sup> Some of the many authors used by Stegemann include Hephaestio, al-Qasrani, al-Rijāl, Rhetorius, Abu Bakr, Abraham ibn Ezra, Leopold of Austria, 'Umar al-Tabarī, and many other authors and compilations. Pingree's later edition of Dorotheus's *Carmen* (dedicated to Stegemann) was not a continuation of Stegemann's project, but rather a translation of 'Umar al-Tabarī's Arabic version, which differs in certain respects from other versions.

<sup>3</sup> As I explain below, I use Stegemann's edition in parallel with the Latin. I also draw on Crofts's Arabic edition of *On Elect.*, and have provided a translation of Māshā'allāh's Arabic *Chap. Rains*.

<sup>4</sup> I note here that Crofts argues Sahl uses a totally different edition of *Carmen*. See my notes to *On Elect.* in §12 below.

chus), we could possibly reconstruct all of the main points of medieval astrology retrospectively—though of course it took them centuries of practice, reading, experimenting, commentary, and so on.

I had originally planned to include as footnotes all of Stegemann's commentary on the individual sections, which offer extensive references to many Hellenistic astrologers; but the commentary itself runs to almost thirty pages, and it really deserves its own translation, especially due to the numerous Greek quotations and references to the *CCAG*. But as a point of interest, I have here translated portions of Stegemann's own Introduction, to give the reader a sense of his thought. First we begin with some comments on the transmission of materials:

“The Arabic terminology of the planetary positions, based on conjoining and flowing away,<sup>5</sup> is found in situational horoscopy<sup>6</sup> (which works with the Moon and its position relative to the planets and the zodiacal signs), systematically handled openly for the first time in the *Textbook* of the Jew Sahl ibn Bishr ibn Habib (ca. 785—845? in Khurasan, an attendant of al-Hasan, the Vizier under the Caliph al-Ma'mun). Sahl wrote in Arabic. We definitely have his textbook in a copy in the original language, as it was translated and excerpted by the Byzantines as well as in the West, in Latin transmissions in the Middle Ages, [and] enjoyed great respect—Zahel, as the author is called here, is afterwards much cited in the emergent astrological works in the West—the corresponding chapter is a suitable departure point for a small study that should be instructive for the connection of the Arabic with the ancient astrology, and the adoption of these terms in the medieval astrology of the Byzantines and the occidental West.”

After a brief description of the structure of his own book, Stegemann continues:

“The outcome of this investigation into sources should be presented here to a certain extent only as theses. Everything (or very much) of what this terminological chapter of Sahl contains, goes for the most part back to the Greek astrologer Dorotheus of Sidon. He lived around

---

<sup>5</sup> *Defluxion*. That is, “separation.”

<sup>6</sup> *Augenblickshoroskopie*, lit. “moment-horoscopy.”

Christ's birth, and reached to the time of Tiberius. His influence on the astrology of late antiquity (possibly through the mediation of Theophilus of Edessa, as he came to Baghdad) allowed the Arabs to be attentive to him. Dorotheus's significance for the beginnings of Arabic astrology appears even greater (according to the results of this work) than I hitherto was able to make plausible.<sup>7</sup>

"In a succession of works I have hitherto been able to explain that, in the astrological literature of the Arabs from the Greeks, next to Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, for great stretches the poet Dorotheus is written out and often also presented there, [even] where he is not expressly cited.

"The little writing at hand produces another example for this question, which the results I obtained earlier confirm; and it puts me in the [right] situation to append some further fragments of the hitherto arranged material. In essence, the interpretation applies only to one chapter of the *Introduction*; but according to the results one must suspect that Sahl has written his entire *Introduction* as an extensive application of Dorotheus. I believe we are now permitted to argue that the beginnings of astrology in the Arabic language rest on very few ancient writers. Systematic researches into the still unedited mass of the Arabic astrologers' manuscripts can definitely expect further results along the lines of this inquiry.

"With the importance that one allots to Sahl's writings in the area of the Mediterranean and in middle Europe (between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Centuries), it again appears impressive how dependent one still was, in these times of the reorganization of the Western spirit in the direction of modern natural science, on antiquity, except that those times could visualize the connection more than in general outlines. The Middle Ages in the occidental West, like in Byzantium, stands here in an unmediated contact with Hellenism, above all that of Ptolemaic Egypt and the astrology published there in the *Hermetica* and in the work of Nechepso-Petosiris. From these writings Dorotheus took most of his material. It wandered over the late antique East (Syria) to-

---

<sup>7</sup> Stegemann is referring to his 1939 compilation of Dorothean fragments.

ward Baghdad and the Middle East and into Arabian Egypt, in order to reach from there over north Africa (Tunisia) to Spain (Toledo) and Sicily, from where it was brought further to middle Europe and eastern Europe; then also manuscripts with the Latin translation of the *Introduction* can be found in the libraries of St. Petersburg and Krakow. The printed edition in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries completed what the manufacturers of astrological manuscripts had begun. Since then, printings of Sahl's works can be found in many great and small libraries in all of Europe. A great part of what they convey belongs, without it being recognizable, to the ancient astrologer Dorotheus of Sidon."

For the Arabic basis of his text, Stegemann used Manuscript #V 799 (formerly D.C. 116), at the Universitätsbibliothek in Leipzig. For his Latin, he relied on three manuscripts<sup>8</sup> and the 1493 printed edition (the same one I am using for other parts of Sahl). Following are some comments he makes about the middle Latin transmission:

"Writings of Sahl ibn Bishr, among them the *Book of Judgments*, belong to the earliest ones that were made accessible to the West in middle Latin translations. Of these translations, we already have manuscripts from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century; they were copied up to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in increasing numbers, which suggests [both] their widespread use and—in the understanding of that time—their practical reliability in the study of astrology in western Europe.

"The Western translator of Sahl's work is unknown. We must seek him in western Europe, in Spain or southern France. Of the translators of the time, possibilities are Hermann of Dalmatia<sup>9</sup> (who made a name for himself through his transmission of the *Great Introduction* of Abū Ma'shar (1120 AD?)), Plato of Tivoli, and John of Spain; above all the

---

<sup>8</sup> They are: (1) Clm. 130 21, from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century (Catalogue #9264), and (2) Clm. 189 27, from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (Catalogue #9265), both at the Staatsbibliothek in Munich. (3) "Soest, the Stadtbibliothek 24 #12, from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (Catalogue #9266)."

<sup>9</sup> Now often called Hermann of Carinthia.

last-named had translated numerous astrological books into Latin, among them likewise the *Great Introduction* of Abū Ma‘shar.”<sup>10</sup>

Following this Stegemann discusses the transmission of manuscripts and the quality of various editions, and why he chose 1493 as his printed source (it is the earliest, for one thing). Further discussion need not detain us here.<sup>11</sup>

For now I turn to other topics of interest to astrologers in this volume (§§3—11). After discussion these other topics, I will provide information and interesting details on each of the works, including my source texts for each (§§12—13).

### §3: *Five Relations to Domiciles*

In these texts we see several configurations and conditions which Sahl and Māshā’allāh consider important, but which lack either formal definitions or clear statements about their theoretical background or practical value. But if we pay close attention to what Sahl and Māshā’allāh say throughout their works, we can find valuable hints and comments. In this section I would like to lay out briefly five relationships that planets have to the twelve domiciles, explaining what Sahl and Māshā’allāh say about them, what I believe their underlying concept is, and how they may be used. The five relationships are: (a) being the Lord of a domicile; (b) being in a domicile of one’s own or another’s; (c) aspecting one’s own domicile by whole-sign aspect; (d) aspecting one’s own Lord by whole-sign aspect; and (e) reception. These relations may not be very tightly interconnected, but they share certain features in common. I believe that if we can harness these relationships properly, our understanding of traditional astrology will increase greatly, and our practice will improve.

(a) Being the Lord of a domicile. This is the simplest and most abstract relation. All planets rule at least one domicile. And it is telling that the typical Arabic word for what we call the domicile Lord (*dominus domus*) is *ṣāhib*,

---

<sup>10</sup> If we are confined to these three choices, there is no doubt it must be John of Spain. The styles of Hermann and Plato of Tivoli are very different from John’s and this edition of Sahl.

<sup>11</sup> Stegemann also does much to compare the Arabic, Latin, and Greek editions of the *Introduction*. Hopefully it will be possible in the future to have complete translations of all of Stegemann’s works, especially his reconstructed edition of Dorotheus (1939).

“owner.” The basic concept behind being a domicile Lord is *ownership*. A related notion is that of *management*. The domicile Lord *owns* the domicile, and is its chief *manager*, much as we think of someone who owns his own home and is the head of the household. The domicile Lord is in charge and sets the rules for the home (even though the exalted Lord is in some sense higher still), so it is the default planet we look to in deciding how to judge a matter.

(b) Being in a domicile. This relationship runs a spectrum between being in one’s own domicile or exaltation, to intermediate states such as being in a domicile of one’s own triplicity, or perhaps the domicile of a sect-mate, to the other extreme of being peregrine (lit. “foreigner, pilgrim”), in a domicile in which one has no rulership. For now I wish to minimize the intermediate states. The contrast between a planet being in its own domicile (or exaltation) and being peregrine is one between being (1) independent, self-reliant and in control, and (2) being dependent and in a relative state of helplessness—i.e., reliant on the Lord of the domicile one is in. This is a logical extension of the concept of ownership and management.

These first two relationships are basic in traditional astrology, and they are found in plenty of other texts. But these works of Sahl and Māshā’allāh also speak of three other relationships, to which I now turn.

(c) Aspecting one’s own domicile by whole-sign aspects. There are no references in these works to aspecting intermediate cusps, and references to planets aspecting the angular degrees are still somewhat speculative. But it is very clear that Sahl and Māshā’allāh are interested in whether or not a Lord aspects its own domicile by a whole-sign aspect. One of the key texts is *On Elect.* §§23b-c, where Sahl says “a planet which does not aspect its own domicile is like a man absent from his own house, who cannot repel nor prohibit anything from it. Indeed if a planet aspected its own domicile, it is like the master of a house who guards it: for whoever is in the house, fears him, and he who is outside fears to come to it.” For Sahl, when a planet aspects its own domicile, it is able to *protect* it,<sup>12</sup> and *provide* for it in the sense that the aspect allows a matter to be perfected, and quickly so.<sup>13</sup> In one case he says that a planet aspecting its own domicile will show someone with a good family stock.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *On Elect.* §§23b-c.

<sup>13</sup> *On Quest.* §§10.1, 10.2, 13.11.

<sup>14</sup> *On Quest.* §10.5.



But if the planet does *not* aspect its own domicile (that is, if it is in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> from it), it can show that the person signified will be in some other land not his own;<sup>15</sup> or it shows someone not staying at home;<sup>16</sup> the Lord will be “inimical” to its own domicile, leading to duress and complications for the matter (so that even if the Lord can perfect a matter, it will not be in the way expected or desired);<sup>17</sup> the Lord will be “in need,” craving and desiring and weak;<sup>18</sup> it will be poor, not able to do much,<sup>19</sup> or not even be able to provide what it signifies,<sup>20</sup> its abilities slow;<sup>21</sup> if it represents a clime in a mundane chart, that clime will suffer detriment.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it will show someone of low stock,<sup>23</sup> as though the person signified is cut off from his roots, having no recognizable lineage; and it can show someone mischievous and deluding,<sup>24</sup> as though he is unreliable, departs from established norms, and is unconnected to normal lines of support and responsibility.

In other words, the aspect to one’s own domicile shows a two-way relation to one’s home and roots. On the one hand, the aspect from the Lord shows his protection of it, providing for its signification, and perfecting it. But this connection also shows that he is supported by it, and not in need. When he is not aspecting, he is in need, with the danger of mischief, he is weakened and cut off from home. *Providing* and *protection* seem to be the key concepts here, and they, too, are related to the notions of home, ownership, belonging.

It seems to me that the contrast here can be shown more vividly if we imagine the difference between (1) a head of household who goes out into the world but keeps in close contact with his family and his responsibilities there, being supported and acting as a provider and protector. This benefits both him and the home. But (2) a head of household who disappears for long periods of time, who does not support the home and cannot or will not take care of crises there, is cut off from its support and appears aimless, irresponsible, his background and morality under suspicion.

---

<sup>15</sup> *On Quest.* §10.8.

<sup>16</sup> *On Elect.* §46.

<sup>17</sup> *On Quest.* §10.2.

<sup>18</sup> *On Rev.* Chs. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> *On Quest.* §13.11.

<sup>20</sup> *On Quest.* §4.2.

<sup>21</sup> *On Quest.* §9.6.

<sup>22</sup> *On Rev.* Intro.

<sup>23</sup> *On Quest.* §10.5.

<sup>24</sup> *On Elect.* §35.

So if the Lord of the Ascendant in a nativity is in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> domiciles, then it will not aspect its own domicile. By its location it will show a key area of life the native finds himself in. But since the Lord wants to produce the native's life and well-being, being cut off from the rising sign means that he will be slower to realize the native's happiness, will find difficulty in doing so, will feel a lack of support or rootedness, might perhaps find himself surrounded by mischief or subject to matters not in his direct control. Now, all of this must be taken in context, and it may not apply equally easily to all situations. For instance, if the Lord of the 11<sup>th</sup> were in the 10<sup>th</sup>, then the native's friends will be involved in his advancement, profession, and honor. Although the Lord of the 11<sup>th</sup> is not aspecting the 11<sup>th</sup> domicile, it would not necessarily mean that the friends are ineffective. After all, the Lord is still aspecting the rising sign, and so we would still expect the friends to affect the native productively. But perhaps the delineation could be refined on the basis of this lack of aspect to the 11<sup>th</sup>, along with other features in the chart.

(d) The fourth relation is that of aspecting one's own dispositor by whole signs. I emphasize whole signs, because if the texts meant an aspect by orbs or exact degree, then it would immediately be a case of reception proper—but in these cases the texts never speak of reception, only aspecting one's own Lord (and especially the Moon aspecting her own Lord). So I take this to be a whole-sign aspect, just as in aspecting one's own domicile above.

In the case of the Moon, the indications are relatively straightforward and general, probably because she is the universal significatrix for everything on earth. If she aspects her Lord (by whole signs), then matters will go well, quickly, and smoothly for what she signifies (Sahl emphasizes this in elections).<sup>25</sup> But for other planets, there are few passages in the texts, and there seems to be a distinction. In general, a planet aspecting its Lord (by whole signs) will have its strength doubled for its task;<sup>26</sup> have joy and security;<sup>27</sup> and the person signified will be bold and faithful to his master; but if it did not aspect, the person signified will not be faithful.<sup>28</sup> However, in issues of conflict, imprisonment, and so on, if a planet aspects its Lord, then that Lord will have *control* over that planet, and it will not be good for it.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *On Elect.* §§35, 46, 47b, 51, 53, 59c, 104b, 126a, 138c, 140a; *On Quest.* §13.11.

<sup>26</sup> *On Quest.* §7.25.

<sup>27</sup> *On Rev.* Ch. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *On Quest.* §7.25.

<sup>29</sup> *On Quest.* §§7.25, 13.10.