

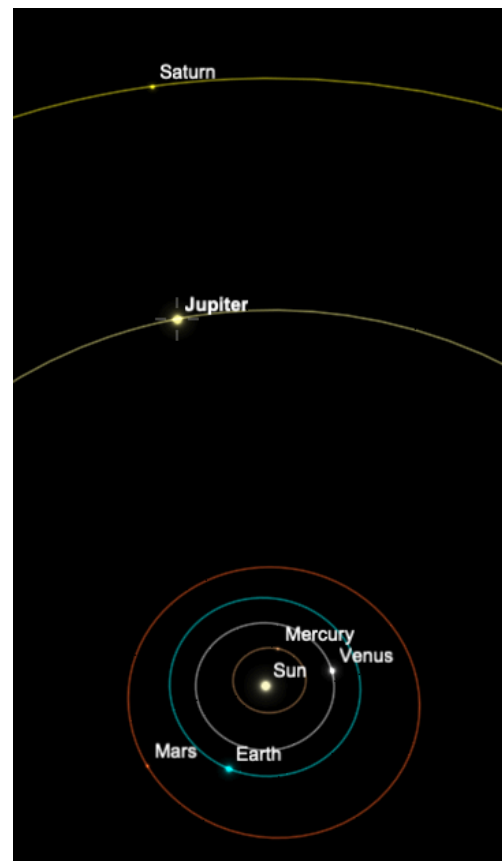
The 2020 Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter

Jeremy Brown

Monday evening, December 21st is a special time for those who gaze upwards. If you look towards the south western sky soon after sunset, you will see an unusually bright light close to the horizon. The bright light is actually coming from two planets which are so close together that to the naked eye they appear to be almost a single object. Welcome to the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. For many centuries this event was an omen of terrible things to come, and occupied the attention of several medieval Jewish scholars, perhaps most notably Abraham Ibn Ezra.

A *conjunction* occurs when two or more bodies in the sky appear very close to each other. Saturn and Jupiter are the two outermost planets in our solar system that are visible to the naked eye. They usually appear far apart from each another as they wander across the night sky. Saturn appears to orbit the earth once every thirty years or so; Jupiter orbits every twelve years. As they do so, faster moving Jupiter catches up with Saturn every twenty years, much as a faster runner overtakes a slower one as they race around a track. That's a conjunction. The stary background against which these conjunctions appear changes over longer periods of time. The conjunctions move through the twelve signs of the zodiac, each occurring 240 degrees removed from the previous one. If the first occurs in Aires, the next will occurs in Sagittarius which is 240 degrees away, and the next in Leo. These conjunctions form a rough triangle inside a zodiacal circle, and the three signs so related are known as a *trigon*, as shown in the diagram. In relation to the fixed stars, it takes some 900 years for a conjunction to appear near to the starting point of the sequence.¹

View of the solar system 16 Astronomical Units from Jupiter. Note how, as seen from earth, Saturn and Jupiter are close together.



¹ Donald V. Etz, "Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn," *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 94 (2000).

Over the last few months Saturn and Jupiter have appeared closer and closer together. While in reality they are 400 million miles apart, from here on earth Jupiter will appear to cover Saturn. They haven't looked this close since 1623, and won't appear this close again until 2080. So don't miss it. Afterwards, they will begin to appear as separate objects, and move father and father apart.

How to spot the conjunction

Exactly when the conjunction is best seen depends on where you live. It will be visible for only a couple of hours after sunset. On the east coast of the US, it will be visible from dusk until 7.07pm. In London, England the sun sets at 3.54pm. Dusk begins around 4.35 and you will have until 5.50pm before the two planets set. In Jerusalem dusk begins around 5.10pm, and you will have until 6.35pm.

What happens if it is cloudy?

Come back the next night. Unlike a solar eclipse, the conjunction is a slowly moving event. If it is cloudy one night - even if that night is Dec 21st, just come back the next night and take a look. The two planets will have moved apart a little, but only a little. It is still worth a look. No special equipment is needed. Oh, and one more thing. It is just luck that this conjunction occurs on the shortest day of the year, known as the winter solstice. The two are not otherwise connected.

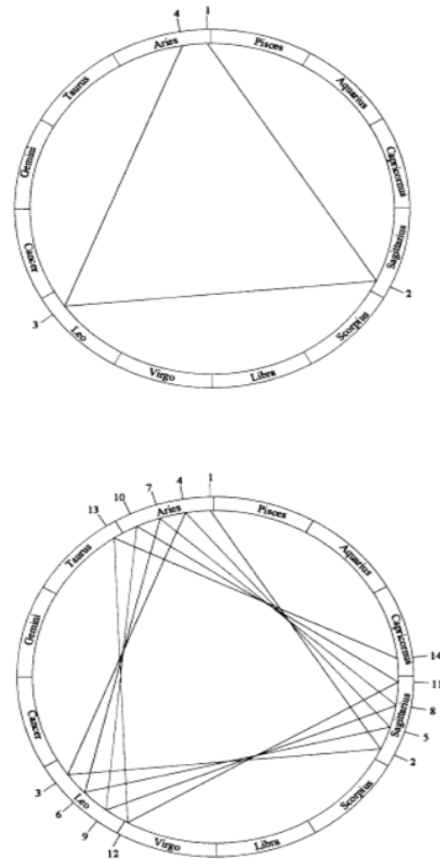
The Conjunction as an Omen

Conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter occur every twenty years or so and for humankind the vision of the two planets united as one was a harbinger of plague, war, famine and pestilence, an omen of terrible things to come. Or not.

Although there are several lengthy discussions in the Talmud about the influence of the planets on the fate of humanity, none makes any mention of conjunctions. But writing about three hundred years after the close of the Talmud, Saadia Gaon (d. 942C.E.)

A conjunction triangle (trigon) for Saturn-Jupiter conjunction (top) and a partial conjunction sequence across the zodiac (bottom). From Etz, Donald V.

"Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn." *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 94 (2000): 174-78.



mentioned the belief of the terrible consequences of the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction in his introduction to the Book of Daniel.² He explained a belief that the twenty-year conjunction of the planets allowed for predictions to be made about individual kings. The conjunctions that occurred every 238 or 258 years could be used to make predictions about families, and those that occurred in a cycle of 944 or 964 years “influenced the governance from one nation to another.”³ However, he did so only to reject the notion that these conjunctions or indeed any planetary alignments were of consequence. They were nonsense, as fanciful as other means of divination like the “observation of the organs of animals, such as the liver and the shoulder blade, of eggs and the like.”

*Indeed, things have come so far as the claim that the nations in their countries and the people of every kingdom they rule – their fate is determined by the judgments of the stars. They have relied in all this on **the conjunction of the two superior planets, I mean Saturn and Jupiter**. For they find that both of these planets are in conjunction once in a period of approximately twenty years... However, the Lord, may He be exalted and magnified, has made it known in His books that none of the wise men know anything about the duration of the kingdoms and their ends...⁴*

Saadia’s rejection of astrology was shared by Maimonides in his *Iggeret Teiman*, an epistle about many aspects of faith written to the Jews of Yemen around 1173.

*I note that you are inclined to believe in astrology and in the influence of the **past and future conjunctions of the planets** upon human affairs. You should dismiss such notions from your thoughts. Cleanse your mind as one cleanses dirty clothes. Accomplished scholars whether they are religious or not, refuse to believe in the truth of this science...*

For while the Gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will they even rise above their present condition, and all the astrologers, diviners, and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove false their views and beliefs, and will order the advent of the Messiah... This is the correct view that every Israelite should hold, without paying any attention to the conjunctions of the stars...⁵

² The work is only known in manuscript form from the Cairo Genizah, with sections held in libraries in the Antonin Collection at the Russian National Library and Cambridge University. The reconstructed text was published in a 2004 paper in *Aleph*. See Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Saadia’s Introduction to Daniel: Prophetic Calculation of the End of Days Vs Astrological and Magical Speculation," *Aleph* 4 (2004).

³ Ibid. 70-72.

⁴ “The polemical nature of Saadia’s writing here is unmistakable. As a point of departure for understanding the argument, we may assume that it was directed against Jewish proponents of astrology, especially as they related to the book of Daniel and the prediction of a timetable for the ultimate Redemption.” Ibid.

⁵ Available at https://www.sefaria.org/Iggerot_HaRambam%2C_Iggeret_Teiman.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

The Conjunction in the writings of Ibn Ezra

Perhaps unaware of these objections to astrology, or perhaps in spite of them, several later rabbinic scholars wrote about the astrological consequences of planetary conjunctions in general, and of the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction in particular. The most famous of these was the biblical commentator, grammarian, poet and astronomer Abraham Ibn Ezra (d.1167), who, “by incorporating astrological ideas into his influential biblical exegesis...promoted the smooth absorption of astrological content into the hard core of Jewish culture.”⁶

Among the fourteen books he wrote on astronomy was *Sefer haMachbarot* (*The Book of Conjunctions*), in which the influence of the conjunction of the two planets was discussed in great detail.⁷ Ibn Ezra believed that the sun and planets, together with the constellations across which they appeared to travel through the night sky influenced the fates of nations, cities and religions. Jupiter in Aires held sway over Iraq, Saturn in Libra over Rome. The sun held sway over Christians, Saturn over the Jews, and Venus over the Moslems.⁸ Like all of his contemporaries, Ibn Ezra’s astrology paid additional attention to conjunctions, of which the most important was that of Saturn and Jupiter. These conjunctions had influenced the births of prophets and leaders, including Moses, Jesus and Mohammed.⁹

רק דבר מנוסה היא שאריה ושמש לאדום, ובו הייתה המחברת טרם שיוולד האישי שחושבים שהו אלוה...והמחברת ההוא
טרם קום נביא הישמעאלים לפי דברם היתה במזל עקרוב...

“The conjunction [of Saturn and Jupiter] took place before the birth of the man they consider to be God...and the conjunction [of Saturn and Jupiter] in the sign of Scorpio took place before the emergence of the prophet of the Moslems.”

Ibn Ezra did not just emphasize the importance of the conjunction in his many esoteric works of astrology. He included it his commentary on the Torah, in a long passage found on Exodus 33:21, printed in any edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot*.

⁶ Shlomo Sela, ed. *Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Book of the World. A Parallel Hebrew-English Critical Edition of the Two Versions of the Text.*, 2 vols., vol. 2. *Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Astrological Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). 1.

⁷ The work was titled both *Sefer HaMachbarot* and *Sefer Haolam*, though Ibn Ezra subsequently used only used the second of these titles. There are three manuscript versions of the work, two of which are held at the Vatican Library. One of these was published in 1937 by J.L. Fleischer using the Vatican MS Ebr. 390, and is available [here](#). For a review of the scientific writings of Ibn Ezra see "Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Scientific Corpus Basic Constituents and General Characterization," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 11 (2001).

⁸ Yehudah Leib Fleischer, *Sefer Haolam* (Berehovo: Haladas, 1937). 14, 19.

⁹ Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Book of the World*. 164-165.

ודע כי כל הצמחים והחיים בארץ והעוף והבהמה והחיה והרמש וכל אדם קשורים בעליונים. כי הכללים קשורים בארבעים ושמונה צורות הגלגל...

והנה המחברת **השניים העליונים במזל טלה** היא בכל תשע מאות וששים שנה. ושניהם סובבים ממזל התחברותם אל מזל תשיעי בכל עשרים שנה. ככה יתגלגלו שנים עשרה פעמים עד מאתים וארבעים שנה. ומשם יתגלגלו כמספר הזה ובדרך הזה במזלות העפר. גם במזלות הרוח. גם במזלות המים....

ובעבור זה אמר ה' אחר אשר חלק. ואתכם לקח ה' להיות לו לעם נחלה. ככה לא כאלה חלק יעקב כי יוצר הכל הוא. וזהו ונפלינו אני ועמך. וזהו שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל אין מזל לישראל כל זמן שהם שומרי התורה. ואם לא ישמרוה ישלטו בהם המזל כאשר הוא מנוסה. כי כל מחברת ומזל דלי במערכת רעה. הנה יבא רעה לשונאי ישראל. והיודעים חכמת המזלות יודו כן. והנה היתה במערכת השמים במחברת שיעמדו בגלות מצרים עוד שנים רבות. ובעבור שצעקו אל השם ושבו אליו הושיעם השם. וכאשר יקרה לכלל כן יקרה ליחיד על כן שומר תורה אשרהו:

Know that all plants and everything that lives on earth, all birds, domesticated and wild quadrupeds, and other animals, and all human beings, depend on the celestial bodies, because the species depend on the forty-eight constellations of the orb

... The conjunction of the two uppermost planets [i.e., Saturn and Jupiter] in the sign of Aries takes place every 960 years, and both revolve from the sign of their conjunction to the ninth [following] sign every 20 years, and they repeat this cycle twelve times to make up two hundred and forty years. From there they repeat this cycle the same number of times and in the same manner in the earthy signs, in the airy signs, and in the watery signs....

It is because of this that [Scripture] states, "which the Lord thy God has allotted" (Deut. 4:19); "But you hath the Lord taken ... to be unto Him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day" (Deut. 4:20); "The portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the former of all things" (Jer. 51:19). This is the meaning of "so that we are distinguished, I and Thy people" (Ex. 33:16). This is what the Sages mean by "there is no mazzal for Israel" (B. Shabbat 156a) – as long as they observe the Torah...

But if they do not observe the Torah, then the zodiacal sign rules over them, as has been proven by experience, for any conjunction [of Saturn and Jupiter that takes place] when Aquarius is in an evil configuration results in harm to Israel. Those versed in astrology admit that a conjunction took place in a configuration which meant that they would remain in exile in Egypt for many more years, but because they cried out to God and returned to Him, He saved them.¹⁰

From Ibn Ezra we also know that Solomon Ibn Gabriol (d.1058) and Avraham bar Hiyyah (d. ~1140) believed that it was possible to link the conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter to a

¹⁰ Ibid. 272-279. As Sela notes, there are textual variants in the *Mikraot Gedolot*, and his translation, which is used here, is based on a collation of fifteenth-century manuscripts.

calculation of the arrival of the Messiah. Ibn Ezra was critical of these eschatological attempts, but not of the significance of the conjunctions and their important role in astrological computations.¹¹

The provenance of Ibn Ezra's astrology was of course Jewish in so far as he cited many Talmudic passages that discussed the influence of the stars and planets. But it contained much more from non-Jewish works of astrology. His work was "an accumulation of sources and doctrines that go back to the very beginnings of the astrological literature."¹² This includes ancient Egyptian and Babylonian sources, as well as later Hellenistic works by Ptolemy. In fact, Ptolemy was "Ibn Ezra's most important astrological and scientific source, to whom he refers in his entire work more frequently than to any other scientist or astrologer."¹³ He also mentions several Islamic scholars on whom he based his work, of which the most prominent was Abu Ma'shar Ghafar Ibn Muhammad Ibn Umar al-Balkhi (787-886). Ibn Ezra's astrology had an influential role in the spread of Abu'Ma'shar's ideas into the west. In the thirteenth century his *Sefer Olam* was translated first into French and from there into Latin. Much of it was incorporated into the fourteenth century supercommentary on Ibn Ezra by Joseph ben Eliezer Bonfils known as *Zafnet Paneach*.

The Conjunction in the writings of Avraham bar Hiyyah

Avraham bar Hiyyah (c.1070~1145) was an extremely influential Catalan mathematician and astrologer. He wrote two famous works on astronomy, *Tzurat Ha'aretz* and *Heshbon Mahalakh HaKochavim* and in a lesser known work of astrology called *Megillat HaMegalleh* he detailed how the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter explained the course of Jewish history.¹⁴ Moses was born under the influence of a conjunction, he fled Egypt during one, and stayed in Midian until there was a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Scorpio.¹⁵ With the next conjunction it became time to punish the kingdom of the wicked Pharaoh.

ובעלי האומנית הזאת סבורים שבדבוק הרביעי הזה ברח משה מלפני פרעה אל ארץ מדין ועמד שם עד הדבוק החמישי
כשנתחבו שניהם במזל עקרב. ואין אנו יכולים לבטל את דבריהם ולא לקיימם מפני שאין אנו מוצאים ברברי רבותינו
ז"ל מספר הימים אשד עמד

¹¹ Ibid. 9.

¹² Ibid.11.

¹³ Ibid. 14.

¹⁴ "Abraham Bar Hiyya's Astrological Work and Thought," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2006). The work is available [here](#).

¹⁵ J. Guttman, *Sefer Megillat Ha-Megalleh Von Abraham Bar Chija* (Berlin: A. Poznanski, 1924).122.

... והדבוק הניע אל מזל עקרב אחר הדבוק הזה בשנת י"ב מן המחזור קכ"ט שנת אלפים תמ"ד לעולם. ומזל עקרב הוא בית מלכות הרשע והוא מן המזלות השולטות על מצרים לדברי אנשי החכמה הזאת. ובדבוק הזה הגיע זמן מלכות פרעה הרשע להשמד ולהחרב.

Those who subscribe to this system believe that during the fourth conjunction [of Saturn and Jupiter] Moses fled to Midian from Pharaoh Midian until the fifth conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Scorpio. We cannot be sure about this calculation because we do not have anything from the rabbis [of the Talmud] about the length of time this took.

After that conjunction, then next one moved towards the constellation of Scorpio in the 12th year of the 129th cycle, in the Year 1,444 of creation. Scorpio is one of the constellations that rules over Egypt, according to the astrologers. During this conjunction the time arrived to destroy and desolate the kingdom of the wicked Pharaoh...

The conjunctions continued to influence both general and Jewish history, with a rule that whenever they occurred with Pisces a calamity of some sort would befall the Jewish people.¹⁶

ואתה רואה בכל עת אשר היה הדבוק נופל במזל דגים שהוא מזל הדבוק הראשון היה מתחדש על ישראל מאורע קשה

With copious calendrical precision bar Hiyyah details the fall of the kingdoms of Judea and Israel and the association with the conjunctions. In contrast he notes that the birth of Jesus was *not* heralded by a conjunction, because "he was belittled and despised by his people, and he never reached greatness in this world."¹⁷

ואמרו שבשנת ג' אלפים תשצ"ג לעולם שהיא שנה אחת לפני הדבוק הזה נתלה ישו בן פנדירא שחיק עצמות ולשנה אחריו יצאו תלמידי הפריצים הרעים להטעות את העולם. ואין אתה מוצא בדבוק הזה ולא בדבוק אשר לפניו אות ללידת ישו התלוי הזה מפני שהיה שפל ומאוס בעיני עמו ולא היתה לו גדולה בעולם כל ימי חייו אבלי אלו הרשעים תלמידי החיו אח זכרו אחרי מותו... וכן לא היה כח לאנשים הרשעים האלו ולא עלה להם זכר כל ימי הטריגון הזה.

¹⁶ Ibid.126.

¹⁷ Ibid. 136.

In the year 3793 of creation, which was one year before [a] conjunction, Jesus (ben Pandariah), may his bones rot, was crucified. The following year his wicked disciples spread their attempt to trip the world into error. The birth of Jesus the crucified was not heralded by a conjunction because he was belittled and despised by his people, and he never reached greatness in this world in his life. However his wicked disciples continued his memory after his death...But these wicked people had no influence and so they were not foretold in the prior conjunction..

One of the impossibly frustrating features of astrology is the way in which different astrologers interpret astronomical events. The birth of Jesus is a perfect example. According to Ibn Ezra it was foreshadowed by a Saturn-Jupiter conjunction. But in the schema of Avraham bar Hiyyah it was an unimportant event and as such it was not heralded by a conjunction. Not only did the two disagree about the historical significance of the founder of Christianity. They also disagreed about when the Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions even fell.

The Prognostication of 1166

In 1166 there was to be another conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, and astrologers of many faiths composed horoscopes of sorts, known as prognostications. One of these, written in Hebrew, used to be attributed to Ibn Ezra, since it is found in an Oxford manuscript after his *Sefer Hame'orot*. However, based on a philological analysis, it is unlikely to have been written by him, and cannot have been written by Avraham bar Hiyyah since he had died long before the prognostication was composed. Its anonymous author remains unidentified, though was most likely a Jew living in Aragon.¹⁸ The prognostication demonstrates the seriousness with which a Saturn-Jupiter conjunction was taken. Here are some excerpts:

The following prognostication was made in [4]914 [1153-54 C.E.] concerning a [forthcoming] prognostication [to occur on Sunday July 31, 1166]...the conjunction will take place in Capricorn...Since the conjunction will be retrograde, it will be very strong and powerful...

¹⁸ Bernard R. Goldstein, "A Prognostication Based on the Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1166 [561 Ah]," in *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honor of David Pingree*, ed. C. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

This [conjunction] indicates a consolidation of the affairs of kings who have inherited their kingdom from their fathers... [By way of contrast] every conspirator and traitor not of royal seed will be weak and abased. This is a major indication concerning the Christian kingdom; their regency will be strengthened, whereas the strength of the conspirators of al-Masmud¹⁹ will diminish, their kingdom will fall and perish, and their alliance will be scattered...

There is hope for our nation in these years of the conjunction, with the help of God, kings will honor them, elevate them, make them great, and join with them...

The sun will enter the beginning of Aires in the middle of the ninth hour of Wednesday the 20th day of Jumada I according to the reckoning of the Moslems...or in the evening of March 23...All this indicates the success of the king of Aragon in that year and the increase of his greatness...in the first years of the conjunction crops will increase. But in the fourth year there will be death and great famine in the lands of Qedar...

The people [of Israel] will move from their place to other land...many warriors will rest from war.... Wonder will be seen in the East, and in the Land of Israel new things will happen, as also in other land. The summer will be made temperate, and the heat of the sun will be milder...Blessed be God who knows future events, for there is none like him. Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. Amen.

וברוך האל היודע העתידות כי אין זולתו. ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד.

The Conjunction in the writings of Lev ben Gershon

Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) was a French polymath who mostly referred to astrology in his main work, *Milchamot Adonai*. In addition there is a single manuscript held at the University of Cambridge which contains Levi's prognostication for the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter that occurred on March 14th, 1345 (10 Nisan 5105).²⁰ Avraham bar Hiyyah had noted this conjunction in his *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, and had considered it in his messianic calculations, which were based on a date derived from the Book of Daniel. Levi ben Gershon predicted unrest and turmoil for the next decade that would come to a head in 1355. But he never lived to test the accuracy of his prognostication, for he died in April 1344.

¹⁹ Goldstein identifies the term as referring to one of the principal Berber ethnic groups in North Africa. See *ibid.* 748.

²⁰ MS Cambridge, heb., Add. 1563, folios 104b:20-106a:8. For a detailed description and translation see Bernard R. Goldstein and David Pingree, *Levi Ben Gerson's Prognostication for the Conjunction of 1345* (American Philosophical Society, 1990).

Now I say that it is known by experience that a conjunction (machberet) of Saturn with Jupiter signifies great and general events. When it takes place in [one of] the airy [zodiacal] signs, its impact is of great strength. When it takes place in a fixed (omed) sign, its impact will last for many days. This is the case for the conjunction to take place on 28 March [13]45...

According to [the planetary] configuration it indicates the destruction of a nation and a kingdom by a nation of a different religion. This will begin to happen in the tenth year[after]the aforementioned conjunction according to this configuration because this conjunction will take place in the third house that signifies religions...According to what is manifest in [the planetary] configuration the evil for these countries will begin from the north. Since Saturn and then Mars will dominate this conjunction, this indicates extraordinary evil with many wars, visions, and miraculous signs...Since the conjunction is strong and Mars is eastern and also will dominate the ascendant, it indicates the spilling of much blood and increasing enmity, jealousy, hatred, strife, famine, various diseases, drought, and dearth....

On account of Saturn it indicates much disease, senseless enmity, strife, destruction of places, collapse, and the sinking of ships in some seas. The conjunction with Mars indicates burning heat in some latitudes, many dry exhalations, comets and for most of the inhabited[world], wars, calamities, death by the sword, killing, and destruction...

Up to here [is all that] he revealed and added nothing more, for he [Levi] was beckoned to the Upper Academy, may his soul be bound up in the bond of [everlasting] life.

Levi's prognostication carried considerable weight and was translated into Latin at the request of Pope Clement VI. In hindsight it was applied to the terrible European outbreak of bubonic plague that began only three years later, and as a result additional attention was paid to Levi's forecast.²¹ The French astrologer Johannes de Muris (c.1320-1350) also prognosticated for the Pope and was certainly aware of Levi's predictions. "It appears" he wrote, "that the Jews will expect the Messiah before a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter recurs, which will be within ten years, rather than at another time."²²

²¹ Cedric Cohen Skalli and Oded Horezky, "A Fifteenth-Century Reader of Gersonides: Don Isaac Abravanel, Providence, Astral Influences, Active Intellect, and Humanism," in *Gersonides' Afterlife: Studies on the Reception of Levi Ben Gerson's Philosophical, Halakhic and Scientific Oeuvre in the 14th through 20th Centuries*, ed. Ofer Elijor, Gad Freudenthal, and David Wirmer (Leiden: Brill, 2020). 201.

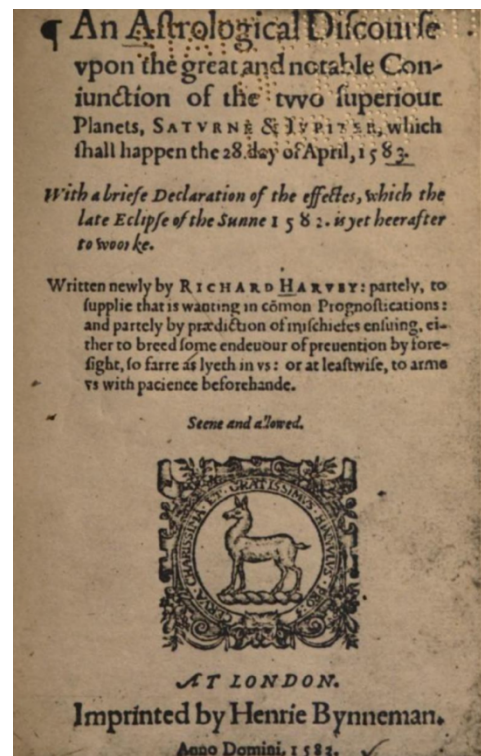
²² Goldstein and Pingree, *Levi Ben Gerson's Prognostication*. 37. Another Jew, Violas de Rodez wrote a detailed political prognostication in Hebrew for the year 1355. However, since this was not based specifically on a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, we will not consider further. For details see Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, "Violas De Rodez' Political Prognostication for the Year 1355: Reaction to the Prognostications for 1345-1355?," in *Gersonides' Afterlife: Studies on the Reception of Levi Ben Gerson's Philosophical, Halakhic and Scientific Oeuvre in the 14th through 20th Centuries*, ed. Ofer Elijor, Gad Freudenthal, and David Wirmer (Leiden: Brill, 2020). For a critical translation see "Violas De Rodez' Astrological Prognostication for the Year 1355: Introduction, Text and Translation," *Aleph* 18, no. 1 (2018).

The Conjunction in Western Thought

The ominous conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter continued to be a cause for alarm in the west during the early modern period. In 1583 a conjunction was to occur that ended the watery trigon of Cancer, Scorpio and Pisces, and would begin the fiery trigon of Aires, Leo, and Sagittarius. These rare circumstances, not having occurred in more than 1,500 years, were dire. Astrologers predicted upheavals and the end of the world. The English Franciscan philosopher Rodger Bacon, (d. c.1292) had predicted that the conjunction of 1583 would be catastrophic:

When the conjunction has changed from this triplicity to another one, as from the end of Cancer to the beginning of Aries, it is then said to be the greatest one, through the revolution of Saturn thirty-two times, and happens every nine hundred and sixty years, and has reference to changes in empires and kingdoms, to impressions of fire in the air, to flood, earthquake, and dearness in the price of food.²³

Contemporary astrologers of the time updated Bacon's prognostication and predicted a terrible future. The English astrologer Richard Harvey wrote a grim book titled *Astrological Discourse upon the great and notable Conjunction of the two superiour Planets, SATURNE & IUPITER, which shall happen the 28 day of April, 1583*. He predicted "eyther a finall dissolution, or a wonderfull horrible alteration of the worlde." There would be cold weather, floods, hatred, violent oppression, "waterie and fierie calamities" and the world would be spared only due to the second coming of the savior.²⁴ Another astrologer, Robert Tanner was certain that the conjunction meant that "the latter dayes of the worlds destruction to be neere at hande, & that the comming of our Lord & Saviour Jesus Christ to judgement, will not bee long."²⁵ But when none of these calamities occurred these prognostications were used by those who opposed the astrology and its foundations.



²³ R Burke, *The Opus Majus of Francis Bacon* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1928). Vol. 1, 284-285.

²⁴ Margaret Aston, "The Fiery Trigon Conjunction: An Elizabethan Astrological Prediction," *Isis* 61, no. 2 (1970). The work is available online [here](#).

²⁵ Ibid. As Margaret Aston has pointed out, William Shakespeare composed some lines that referenced the non-events of 1583 in his *Henry IV* part two (iv, 261-265.)

Today, echoes of the belief that misfortune may follow a conjunction remain. The name of the winter viral disease influenza comes from the Latin *influentia*, meaning influence, for it was believed to be caused by astral alignments, among which was the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. Contemporary professional astrologers remain concerned, though they couch their prognostications in modern language. “Not only will Jupiter and Saturn be uniting in Aquarius, they will also be forming a catalytic square aspect with Uranus in Taurus. At this pivotal moment in our journey, the lightning bolts of Jupiter and Uranus will not only bring down old societal structures but will also impel us to release old personal dreams and drama we have been attached to. There will be new challenges and unknown potential arising as we begin a new era of Jupiter and Saturn that we will need to make space for in our lives.”²⁶ Whatever that means.

The spectacular 2020 conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter takes place following a year of world-wide pandemic misery but will occur within a few days of the start of vaccinations. The ominous celestial omen has become a harbinger of good news.



²⁶ From [here](#). There are hundreds of similar predictions available online.

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