Maimonides was a major opponent of astrology and astral magic in the twelfth century. In a letter to the scholars of Provence (Montpellier), he made the following well known statement:

Know, my masters, that I myself have investigated much into these matters; the first thing I studied is that science which is called judicial astrology (Heb.: gezerat ha-kokhavim)—that is, [the science] by which man may know what will come to pass in the world or in this or that city or kingdom and what will happen to a particular individual all the days of his life. I also have read in all matters concerning all of idolatry, so that it seems to me that there does not remain in the world a composition on this subject, having been translated into Arabic from other languages, but that I have read it and understood its subject matter and have plumbed the depth of its thought.¹

Maimonides' assertion concerning the comprehensive sources of his acquaintance with different idolatrous cults should be taken quite seriously. In part III of Guide of the Perplexed, Chapter 29, he lists a long series of hermetic and magical pseudepigraphical works from which he gained his knowledge of the varieties of sorcery that he defines as idolatry. An examination of the cults described by Maimonides in his works indicates that image worship based on astrological principles, i.e., on causing the spirituality of celestial bodies to descend on idols or other images, is most salient in his major legal and philosophical

works: the commentary to the Mishnah, the *Mishneh Torah*, and the *Guide of the Perplexed*.\(^2\)

Study of Maimonides’ list of sources on image worship shows that he was most concerned with the world view that had emerged in the center in Haran and in particular in Ibn Wahshiyya’s *Kitāb al-Filāḥah al-Nabatiyyah*.\(^3\) But it is a reasonable assumption that if Maimonides read rare works, he had also studied standard theological texts containing heresiographic accounts of various cults of image worship. In this paper, we propose possible sources for one of Maimonides’ explanations of image worshippers’ motivations.

In *Guide* I:36, Maimonides suggests a historical and psychological-religious explanation for the existence of image worship, how it is seen by people in general (“the multitude”), and its believers’ motives. He writes:

Now you know that whoever performs idolatrous worship does not do it on the assumption that there is no deity except the idol. In fact, no human being of the past has ever imagined on any day, and no human being of the future will ever imagine, that the form he fashions either from cast metal or from stone and wood has created and governs the heavens and the earth. Rather it is worshipped in respect of its being an image (Arab. *mithāl*; Heb. *dimyon*) of a thing that is an intermediary between ourselves and God.... However, in spite of the fact that those infidels believe in the existence of the deity, their idolatrous worship entails their deserving destruction; for the reason that their infidelity bears upon a prerogative reserved to God alone, may He be exalted—I mean the prerogative of being worshipped and magnified.... This is so ordained in order that God’s existence may be firmly established in the belief of the multitude. Now the idolaters thought that this prerogative belonged to that which was other than God; and this led to the disappearance of the belief in His existence, may He be exalted, from among the multitude. For the multitude grasps only the actions of worship, not their meanings or the true reality of the Being worshipped through them. Consequently, the idolatrous worship of the infidels entails their deserving destruction, just as the text has it: *Thou shalt not save alive a soul* [Deut. 20:16].\(^4\)

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