

JEWS, JESUS, AND ASTROLOGERS

1984

Having written “Wise Men from the East”, it was probably inevitable that I should be drawn back to the question of the astrological content of the Bible as a whole.

Generally in this matter one is faced with two diametrically opposite points of view. One states that there is absolutely no possibility of any astrological content in scripture, save those passages (especially in some parts of Isaiah) which condemn its use. The other sees the Bible as an almost totally astrological document. I have in my possession (for example) a reprint of *The Astrology of the Old Testament or The Lost Word Regained*, by one Karl Anderson, who claimed to be a “professor of Chaldean, Arabian, and Egyptian Astrology”. It is not especially edifying reading.

In writing this essay I therefore tried to steer a very circumspect path, and only to refer to those parts of the scriptures which seem to be unquestionably astrological in nature. The thing which I had not expected to find – and which greatly surprised me – was that without question the most astrologically orientated books of the Bible are the four Gospels themselves. This is also clearly not because the writers had any particular astrological axe to grind, but because they reflected factually the teachings and actions of Jesus.

This is not in any way to claim or suggest that Jesus was an astrologer. It is simply that one seems to be drawn inevitably to the conclusion that he was very aware of astrological symbolism – as presumably were his disciples and listeners – and quite consciously used it as a part of his teaching technique. This was often in the form of acted parables. Since astrology was seen as very “non Jewish” by the strictly orthodox hierarchy, this may well have been a very real cause for some of the authorities’ displeasure with Jesus, and one which appears to have been entirely neglected by scholars to date.

In this regard one may also wonder whether it may not be part of the reason for Saint Matthew including in his gospel the account of the visit of the astrologers to the infant Jesus. This was to ‘set the scene’ for the astrological content in the later events of the Messiah’s life.

The “inspiration” to prepare the essay was finally triggered by the statement of Fr. Concetti mentioned at its beginning. This seemed to encapsulate all the enmities and prejudices of traditional religion in our present day towards the practice of astrology. One can only wonder what Jesus’ own response to the good father would have been.



In January this year the newspaper of the Vatican – *L’Osservatore Romano* - published an article by the Franciscan theologian Fr. Gino Concetti. It said in part that “Christian morality warns us not to put our faith in horoscopes”, and that belief in

horoscopes is contrary to Christian teaching both on theological and anthropological grounds.

One may perhaps excuse the good father for overlooking the fact that in the 13th century St. Thomas Aquinas wrote in *De Judiciis Astrorum* that “it is not unbefitting to make use of judicial astrology with regard to natural occurrences”. St. Thomas was a Dominican you see, and Franciscans and Dominicans have never been noted for a charitable understanding of each other’s point of view.

However I fear that one must reluctantly admit that it is probably true that orthodox Christianity today casts a more than somewhat cold and disapproving eye upon astrology. In general it appears essentially to say that if one wishes to be involved with astrology two qualifications should be possessed. The first is that one should be intellectually deficient, and the second is the one should be morally corrupt. Now while I can be as stupid as the average citizen and enjoy a tippie of depravity with the common herd, I actually do object that the two above qualifications should be seen as totally descriptive of my character.

And what is more, I believe that I have some quite good grounds for objecting.

So the purpose of this short essay is to look rather quickly at the biblical records upon which the Christian Church erects its theological structures, and to try to discover if they are quite as anti-astrological as people like Fr. Concetti would have us believe.

You see, most Christians tend to take the bible rather seriously. Therefore should we in fact find that even in the scriptures themselves astrological themes are present, then perhaps not only should anti-astrological Christians have some cause to ponder their position, but even humble and innocent astrologers may be given some degree of comfort.

I must however first of all confess that I tend to wince when I come across books titled something like *Astrology and the Bible*. These I usually find to be little more than an exposition of the author’s theories of how almost every verse and certainly every prophecy of the bible is totally and utterly astrologically based. Now this is obviously nonsense. The bible does, however, record first of all the history of a people – the Jews – for a period of about 1,000 years. It then later records the life of a person – Jesus – and other events at the beginning of the Christian era.

We know that during the whole of these periods astrology was a vital and influential force in the ancient world. This being the case, then it would not be surprising to discover that some how, and in some place, this influence is also evident in the written records of those times. Should we in fact find that there are astrological concepts incorporated into the foundation documents of the Christian religion, then it would seem to me that whatever charges one may wish to lay against astrologers, the one that could never be sustained is that their practice is anti-religious, or more specifically, anti-Christian.

Now for many people this is actually a quite serious and personal matter. I know (for example) of a clergyman who has publicly stated that he will not give Holy Communion to any person who comes to the altar rails wearing an astrological

necklet. But even if the matter should not be for the reader such a personal issue, I still hope that the exercise of trying to discover whether or not there are astrological concepts contained in that book which has had such a singularly important influence upon our society and culture, will not be altogether unprofitable.

To begin we really need to try to do two things at the same time. Firstly to remind ourselves of the earlier developments of astrology, and secondly to have some idea of what was happening to the Jewish people during those centuries.

Jewish history seems to have begun properly somewhere about 1,600 to 1,500 BC. A tribe or clan led by a man called Abram (later Abraham) wandered as nomads from the area at the top of the Persian Gulf (specifically Ur of the Chaldees), gradually working its way through what is now present day Palestine. The people finally settled more or less permanently in an area of the Nile delta in Egypt.

Abram and his clan had come from a highly astrologically orientated society. It was about this time that a set of tables called the Enuma-Enu-Anlil series came into being. These contained about 7,000 celestial observations and associated omens. The astrology with which Abram would have been familiar would have been one that relied heavily upon the position of the planets in certain areas of the sky (that is, the concept of “planets in signs”), together with a set of regularly occurring lunar phenomena, and the appearance of sudden and unexpected events such as comets or eclipses.

The so-called “intellectual zodiac” – the zodiac of 360° which allows the establishment of the concept of angular relationships – had not yet been developed. At least not in Babylonian astrology. Whether Egyptian astrology held such concepts at this time is very difficult to know. Babylonian astrology was apparently pretty public, whereas Egyptian astrology was very much a preserve of the priestly castes, and its techniques unknown by the common people.

Indeed whether the Egyptian astrologers were in possession of concepts much in advance of their Babylonian counterparts – and if so whether they were the originators of these or simply the custodians of a system which had come from a far more ancient source – is a fascinating area of speculation but one unfortunately that is much beyond the scope of this essay.

The stay of these people descended from the clan of Abram, who had become known as Hebrews, apparently lasted in Egypt for about 400 years. We know very little about their circumstances beyond that it seems that in general they occupied a place in Egyptian society at the level of common labourers. It is therefore unlikely that any of the knowledge or techniques of Egyptian astrology would have been known to them, and if they had any astrological lore or practices these would most probably have reflected the earlier ones of Babylon which had been brought with them several centuries before.

There are in fact two records in the Old Testament which come from this period, and which do reflect such a Babylonian style of astrology.

The first is from a very ancient passage (Genesis 49:3-27) in which Jacob (said to be Abram's son) blesses his own twelve sons. Each blessing has a strong astrological colouring, and can be fairly easily related to an appropriate zodiacal sign. We will not worry about them all, but several are especially interesting.

"Simon and Levi are brothers, their spades became weapons of violence, for in their anger they killed men, wantonly they hamstrung oxen." The two violent signs of Aries and Scorpio are "brothers", both being governed by Mars. But what is really curious is that Levi was the priestly tribe in later history, and so exempt from warfare. Thus the blessing does not reflect the history or status of Levi and his descendants, but rather a strictly astrological pattern.

"Judah you lion's whelp and Issachar lying down in cattle pens" plainly reflect Leo and Taurus. But "Let Dan be a viper on the road, a horned snake on the path" reminds us that the origin of the glyph for Aquarius was two snakes; one black and one white, and not ripples of water as it is drawn today. The snakes reflected the good and bad sides of wisdom. One recalls the Garden of Eden legend in which the serpent was "more crafty than any other wild creature".

"Zebulun dwells by the sea shore, his shore is a haven for ships" is obviously strongly Cancerian. Yet in the actual geographical division of Palestine among the Jewish tribes, the area of Zebulun was land locked. Again astrological symbolism would seem to be more important than geographical accuracy.

The second are passages that remind us that it was during this period that the most important of all Hebrew festivals commenced. This was what we now call Passover. Its date is the 14th day of Abib. This is the first month of the old Hebrew year, and its commencement was marked by the first new moon after the spring equinox. Thus Passover is a full moon festival.

A later story concerned with David (about 1,000 BC) also emphasises the importance of the lunar festivals. In this King Saul is incensed that David should absent himself from the new moon sacrifice and feast without the King's permission.

About 1,100 BC the Hebrews left Egypt, and this is the period in which we read of Moses, the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and so on. They entered Palestine and established themselves in a series of bloody conflicts with the original inhabitants, until about 1,000 BC they were able to create a kingdom for themselves with Saul as their first king. He was followed by David after a brief civil war, and David by his son Solomon.

After Solomon's death in about 900 BC, the nation was plunged into civil war between two of Solomon's sons. In the end the country was partitioned into a northern kingdom called Israel, and a southern one called Judah.

While the southern kingdom of Judah (in which the city of Jerusalem stood) was small and impoverished, the northern one of Israel was rich and prosperous. It had a thriving trade, and because it was situated across the trade routes between Egypt and Babylon it became a cosmopolitan nation. As a result it also became a very mixed

religious community, and this stirred up the more conservative religionists who followed the old Hebrew God Jehovah.

One such person was a prophet named Amos who lived in the period 800 to 700 BC. In one part of his writings he says:

He who made the Pleiades and Orion
Who makes Taurus rise after Capella
And Taurus set hard on the rising of the Vintager
He who does this, the Lord is his name.

There are two very interesting things about this passage. The first is that it contains some pretty accurate astronomical observations about the rising and setting of certain star patterns. The second is that Amos deliberately makes use of astrological symbolism. The Pleiades are in the constellation of Taurus (the Bull). Why does Amos mentions this sign three times in the short passage?

The worship of God under the form of a Bull was widespread in both Babylon and Egypt at this time. It had also been taken into the worship of the people of Israel. In another part of his writings Amos says “Your calf-gods stink, O Samaria, my anger flares against them. What sort of god is this bull?”

Thus Amos, by deliberating invoking astrological symbolism, says in effect, “Remember, the earthly bull which you worship is itself only a shadow of the heavenly one. Yet the heavenly Bull – which contains the Pleiades – rises and sets only at the bidding of the Lord”. This would have been powerful and persuasive imagery. However the fact that the prophet was able to write in this ways shows that astrological symbolism was not only familiar to him and his readers, but that also its use was not offensive.

Now the years around 700 BC marked the beginning of a period of great turbulence in this part of the world. The rich northern Jewish kingdom of Israel was crushed by the Assyrian empire and disappeared forever (thus vindicating dramatically Amos’ prophecies). The Jewish nation survived only in the poor southern kingdom of Judah. Astrologically this period marks the beginning of that remarkable set of developments which brought modern astrology into being. The zodiac was divided into 360° and the whole of the structures of astrology as we know them – angles, aspects, houses, progressions, all appeared in a relatively short time.

Either Babylonian astrology suddenly took a quantum leap and the new knowledge spread from there to Egypt; or else for some reason now unknown a hitherto secret store of Egyptian knowledge was released and eagerly taken up firstly by Babylonian astrologers and then later by Greek. This is a matter about which you are free to come to you own conclusions.

However, just as this activity was reaching its peak in Babylon another event of enormous importance occurred to the small Hebrew nation living around Jerusalem. The nation was over-run by the Babylonian army and in a kind of 2,500 year prelude to Nazi Germany, the conquerors decided upon a “Final Solution” of their own. The entire nation – apart from the very illiterate and peasant classes – was transported to Babylon some 1,500 miles away.

Sitting in exile in Babylon a Jew could choose one of two ways. Either he could seek to preserve his traditions for the time when he hoped that he would be able to return to Jerusalem. If he chose this path he would exclude with the utmost vigour all foreign Babylonian influences upon his life and culture. He would turn his back upon this wicked civilisation and seek solace in the faith of Judaism. Or else he could look around this great Babylonian civilisation in which he found himself and begin to absorb concepts and ideas that were both new and exciting. And the civilisation of Babylon was one in which astrology was the queen of the sciences. Now it would seem that the Jews in fact took both paths.

It was from this time that much of the Old Testament as we know it today was collated, and that form of worship which is found in the synagogue was developed. So well did these two endeavours keep Judaism alive in Babylon, that later they were also able to preserve the faith through 1,900 years of exile in western Europe as well.

But on the other hand the prophet Ezekiel – writing from this time of captivity in 580 BC – is more than happy to make extensive use of astrological symbolism. He has a vision (Ezekiel 1:4-15) in which he sees God on a throne supported by four creatures. “Their faces were like this.(they) had the face of a man and the face of a lion on the right, (and) on the left the face of an ox and the face of an eagle.”

You will no doubt immediately recognise that the Man represents Aquarius, the Lion Leo, and the Ox Taurus. We need also to recall that the ancient glyph for Scorpio was an Eagle; a symbolism which has much to recommend it.

Moreover these four signs are all Fixed signs, and so very appropriate for those which support the throne of God in the heavens. But further, those on the right – Aquarius and Leo – are Positive Fixed signs, while those on the left – Taurus and Scorpio – are Negative Fixed signs. It seems difficult to believe that this is all simply by fortuitous chance.

Obviously Ezekiel not only had an understanding of a well developed astrology, but found this to be quite compatible and helpful in his religious teaching.

Later he also uses a “day for a year” progression (Ezekiel 4:4-5). “Now lie on your side and I will lay Israel’s iniquity on you: you shall bear their iniquity for as many days as you lie on your side, allowing one day for every year of their iniquity.”

As would be expected, some of Ezekiel’s co-religionists did not like this Babylonian based astrology at all. About 540 BC Isaiah complained, “But no! in spite of your many wives you are powerless. Let your astrologers, your stargazers who foretell your future month by month persist.” Month by month forecasting suggests a pretty sophisticated professional astrology at work. An astrology which – if we are to judge by Isaiah’s grizzles – was more than a little popular with a great many of the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

About 500 BC the Hebrew people were allowed to return to Jerusalem. One hundred years later we find a person called Nehemiah complaining that no one seems very keen on the idea even then, as life was probably a whole lot more interesting in

Babylon. In fact for many centuries after 500 BC the central religious and cultural authority of the Jewish nation lay not in Jerusalem but in Babylon. It would seem that this Jewish Babylonian connection continued into Jesus own day, which is a matter of some importance as we shall see in a moment.

In the 400 years preceding Jesus' birth little more was added to the Jewish biblical writings, but what was seems not infrequently to have at least some sort of astrological "flavour". "For everything its season, and for every activity under heaven its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:1) is really a summary of astrological theory.

In our very hurried trip through biblical history we need now to turn away from the Old Testament – the history of the Hebrew people from about 1,500 BC to close to the beginning of the Christian era – and look first at those New Testament books called the Gospels. These are the records that tell us what we know of the life and teaching of Jesus.

It is not only curious but I think rather suggestive, that the most astrologically significant record of the whole of the bible is associated with the birth of Joshua ben Joseph, or Jesus as the Greek translation has it.

I guess that we are familiar with the general outline of the story in Matthew's Gospel, in which astrologers come to the court of King Herod seeking news of a new born king whose star (they say) has been "seen in the east".

It seems probable that the astrologers would have begun their journey from Sippar – somewhat north of Babylon – where a great school of astrology had existed for many hundreds of years. It was one of the most famous centres of the ancient world and its fame was established long before the Jewish people were taken captive to Babylon.

There is no need to repeat the examination of the details of the account, and the reader is referred back to the essay *Wise Men from the East*. It is sufficient to say that the 'star' was most probably a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces at the dawn of the Piscean age. This leads to the highly probable birth date for Jesus of 27th May 7 BC.

However for our present purpose, we may simply note that the Christian Gospels begin with a piece of detailed and accurate astrological writing. But what is perhaps more interesting is that astrological concepts are picked up strongly in the gospel accounts in ways that attribute astrological themes directly to Jesus himself. The two great astrological themes of the Gospels are firstly (as we might suspect) the Piscean one, and secondly its polar opposite, Virgo.

I do not want here to press the belief that Jesus was born of a Virgin, even though one could perhaps invoke the suggestive symbolism of Jesus being "heavenly born" of Pisces and "earth born" of Virgo. Rather I want to look at those things which fall under the rulership of the two signs. Once it has been stated that Pisces is the ruler of fish, fishermen, wine, sacrifice, and the spiritual life; and Virgo of corn, bread, and healing, one is aware that almost the whole of Jesus' life is contained within these terms.

Let us just look quickly at a few examples.

Six times in the four gospels the writers record that Jesus took some bread and fish and fed great numbers of people. By using the same words as he used at the Last Supper with his disciples – Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it – these miracles stories were obviously meant to indicate the four actions of the Church's Sacrament of the Eucharist (the Mass, Holy Communion). It is impossible to believe that neither Jesus, nor his disciples, nor the crowd, would have failed to understand the astrological significance of the association between fish and wine. The miracles are purposely astrological parables of the sacraments, deliberately used by Jesus and the Gospel writers.

The same thing happens after the resurrection as well. Here again there are two stories of the disciples recognising Jesus after he provides them with a breakfast of bread and fish.

There are as well some other curiously “fishy” stories.

In St. Matthew's Gospel Jesus pays the temple tax by the unusual method of catching a fish in whose mouth he finds the coin with which to pay the tax. This arose after a discussion with the authorities about the propriety of the tax. One may surely interpret this as an astrological parable suggesting that those of the new Piscean age receive their spiritual associations as a free gift from God and not as a result of their paid up membership of the religious institution of Israel.

In another part Jesus asks, “Is there a man among you who will offer his son a stone when he asks for bread, or a snake when he asks for fish?” Again our bread and fish theme is present.

Now I would want to suggest very strongly that this astrological flavour of Jesus' ministry reflects a genuine tradition. It would certainly have angered the religious orthodoxy of his age, who fought strenuously to repress any outside influences reaching into their religious society. One may guess however that those of the ruling political circles (like Herod's court at an earlier time) were of a much more liberal mind, and probably much interested in astrological philosophy and similar matters. As well the common people, being close to the earth, would have responded easily and naturally to astrological symbolism.

Jesus then may have represented in Jewish society those ideas which appealed both to the liberal minded Jew and to the common person, but which were offensive and heretical to strict orthodox Judaism. His willingness to espouse and use Babylonian astrological concepts may indeed be at least one key to understanding the hatred which he obviously engendered among the religious leaders of his age. It may well have been this (at least in part) which they saw as having the potential to undermining their rigid and restrictive religious structure. Perhaps it was Jesus' astrological allusions and parable, as much as his kindness and disrespect for religious authority, which led eventually to his trial and execution.

And that – as they say in the classics – may be something to think about.

There is just one more thing to add. The earliest Christian symbol was the fish. It is our common tradition today to explain this by saying that it was invented by the first Christians as their symbol because the letters of the Greek word for fish could be made to represent the first letters of the phrase, “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour”.

In view of what we have said, I would want to suggest that the fish came first and the explanation later. The fish became the symbol of Jesus because of its startling appropriateness. It spoke through its astrological connotations of the style and content of Jesus’ life and teaching, it reflected the central Eucharistic mystery of the faith, and it portrayed the emergence of a new religious age.

Much of the rest of the New Testament was written by St. Paul, a convert from strict Jewish orthodoxy. His thought forms were quite alien to those which could happily accommodate astrological concepts, and Paul never mentions them. Rather he dwells almost entirely upon legal arguments and parables based upon the Old Testament to explain the new faith.

Astrology emerges only once more, and that is in the last book of the bible, the Book of the Revelations. Once again Ezekiel’s vision appears, with God’s throne supported by the four astrological creatures. In another part we find a vision of the “heavenly city” built upon a twelve fold foundation. The implication of zodiacal correspondence is had to ignore.

So my dear reader, that is why I find it hard to agree with Fr. Concetti that “horoscopes are contrary to Christian teaching both on theological and on anthropological grounds”, whatever that latter actually means.

There is (I would claim) an astrology which is a discernible part of both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian bible, and most especially in the teachings of Jesus. It would seem to be a dangerous thing for the Church to find itself in a position where it is quite clearly implying that its founder was at the best misguided, and at the worst grievously deluded.

Of course I am sure that there are some ways of understanding and using astrology which may well be opposed to Christian ethical and theological positions. There are also no doubt some understandings of Christianity which are unable to countenance any form of the astrological concept. However I am convinced that the first is as just as bad an astrology, as the second is a bad Christianity.

I personally do not find any great problem in talking about “Jews, Jesus, and Astrologers” in the one breath. Nor do I believe that any of these three would have any cause to feel uncomfortable in the other’s presence.