

Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans

FRANZ CUMONT



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Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans

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PREFACE

It is the purpose of these lectures delivered under the auspices of the American Committee for Lectures on the History of Religions, to sum up the results of researches carried on by me for many years in the field of ancient astrology and astral religion. For some facts set forth here in a summary fashion, I can refer the reader interested in the details to a number of special articles published in various periodicals; the proof of other assertions will be given in a larger work that I hope at some future date to publish on this same general theme.

My sincere thanks are due to Mr. J. B. Baker of Oxford who has carried out the task of translating these lectures in so satisfactory a manner; and I am also largely indebted to my friend, Mr. J. G. C. Anderson of Christ Church, who was kind enough to undertake the revision of the manuscript. I also owe some valuable corrections to Prof. Morris Jastrow, Jr., of the University of Pennsylvania, who, as Secretary of the American Committee, may be said to have called this book into existence, and to whom I take pleasure in dedicating the volume, as a mark of recognition of his own researches in the cognate field of Babylonian-Assyrian astrology.

Brussels,
January, 1912

FRANZ CUMONT

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The American Lectures on the History of Religions are delivered under the auspices of the American Committee for Lectures on the History of Religions. This Committee was organised in 1892, for the purpose of instituting "popular courses in the History of Religions, somewhat after the style of the Hibbert Lectures in England, to be delivered by the best scholars of Europe and this country, in various cities, such as Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and others."

The terms of association under which the Committee exists are as follows:

1.—The object of this Association shall be to provide courses of lectures on the history of religions, to be delivered in various cities.

2.—The Association shall be composed of delegates from the institutions agreeing to co-operate, with such additional members as may be chosen by these delegates.

3.—These delegates—one from each institution, with the additional members selected—shall constitute themselves a Council under the name of the "American Committee for Lectures on the History of Religions."

4.—The Council shall elect out of its number a Chairman, a Secretary, and a Treasurer.

5.—All matters of local detail shall be left to the co-operating institution under whose auspices the lectures are to be delivered.

6.—A course of lectures on some religion, or phase of religion, from an historical point of view, or on a subject germane to the study of religions, shall be delivered annually, or at such intervals as may be found practicable, in the different cities represented by this Association.

7.—The Council (*a*) shall be charged with the selection of the lecturers, (*b*) shall have charge of the funds, (*c*) shall assign

the time for the lectures in each city, and perform such other functions as may be necessary.

8.—Polemical subjects, as well as polemics in the treatment of subjects, shall be positively excluded.

9.—The lectures shall be delivered in the various cities between the months of September and June.

10.—The copyright of the lectures shall be the property of the Association.

11.—The compensation of the lecturer shall be fixed in each case by the Council.

12.—The lecturer shall be paid in instalments after each course, until he shall have received half of the entire compensation. Of the remaining half, one half shall be paid to him upon delivery of the manuscript, properly prepared for the press, and the second half on the publication of the volume, less a deduction for corrections made by the author in the proofs.

The Committee as now constituted is as follows:

Prof. Crawford H. Toy, Chairman, 7 Lowell St., Cambridge, Mass.; Rev. Dr. John P. Peters, Treasurer, 227 W. 99th St., New York City; Prof. Morris Jastrow, Jr., Secretary, 248 S. 23rd St., Philadelphia, Pa.; President Francis Brown, Union Theological Seminary, New York City; Prof. Richard Gottheil, Columbia University, New York City; Prof. Robert F. Harper, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; Prof. Paul Haupt, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.; Prof. F. W. Hooper, Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences; Prof. E. W. Hopkins, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; Prof. Edward Knox Mitchell, Hartford Theological Seminary, Hartford, Conn.; President F. K. Sanders, Washburn College, Topeka, Kan.; Prof. H. P. Smith, Meadville Theological Seminary, Meadville, Pa.

The lecturers in the course of American Lectures on the History of Religions and the titles of their volumes are as follows:

1894-1895—Prof. T. W. Rhys-Davids, Ph.D.—Buddhism.

1896-1897—Prof. Daniel G. Brinton, M.D., LL.D.—Religions of Primitive Peoples.

- 1897-1898—Rev. Prof. T. K. Cheyne, D.D.—Jewish Religious Life after the Exile.
- 1898-1899—Prof. Karl Budde, D.D.—Religion of Israel to the Exile.
- 1904-1905—Prof. George Steindorff, Ph.D.—The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians.
- 1905-1906—Prof. George W. Knox, D.D., LL.D.—The Development of Religion in Japan.
- 1906-1907—Prof. Maurice Bloomfield, Ph.D., LL.D.—The Religion of the Veda.
- 1907-1908—Prof. A. V. W. Jackson, Ph.D., LL.D.—The Religion of Persia.¹
- 1909-1910—Prof. Morris Jastrow, Jr., Ph.D.—Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria.
- 1910-1911—Prof. J. J. M. DeGroot.—The Development of Religion in China.

The lecturer for 1911-1912 was Prof. Franz Cumont of Brussels, recognised as the leading authority on Greek Astrology and Mithraism. From 1892 until his resignation in 1910, Prof. Cumont held the Chair of Roman Institutions at the University of Ghent. Since 1899, he has been Curator of the Royal Museums of Antiquities at Brussels. Prof. Cumont's great work on the Mithra Cult was published in 1894-1900, and is the standard work on that subject. This was followed by a smaller summary, *Les Mystères de Mithra*, of which an English translation, under the title "Mysteries of Mithra," was published in 1903. A series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France on *Les Religions Orientales dans le Paganisme Romain*

¹ This course was not published by the Committee, but will form part of Prof. Jackson's volume on the Religion of Persia in the series of "Handbooks on the History of Religions," edited by Prof. Morris Jastrow, Jr., and published by Messrs. Ginn & Company of Boston. Prof. Jastrow's volume is, therefore, the eighth in the series. Prof. De Groot's lectures have not yet been published, but will appear in 1912. Prof. Cumont's volume is, therefore, the ninth in the series.

(Paris, 1907; 2nd ed. 1910) has also appeared in an English garb (Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism. Chicago, 1911).

In 1900 and again in 1907, Prof. Cumont conducted archaeological explorations in Asia Minor and in Northern Syria, the results of which were embodied in his *Studia Pontica* (Brussels, 1906) and in a volume of Greek and Latin inscriptions published in 1911.

In 1898, in collaboration with several scholars, M. Cumont undertook a catalogue, with detailed descriptions and copious extracts, of all Greek astrological codices (*Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*), of which monumental work, up to the present, ten volumes have appeared. A Bibliography of Prof. Cumont's writings, including numerous articles contributed by him to archaeological, historical, and philosophical journals of various countries, was published in 1908 by the Royal Academy of Belgium, of which body M. Cumont has been a member since 1902. He is also a corresponding member of the Institute de France and of the Academies of Berlin, Göttingen, and Munich.

The lectures contained in this volume are a summary in a popular form of extensive researches carried on by Prof. Cumont for many years. They were delivered before the following institutions: The Lowell Institute, Hartford Theological Seminary, Johns Hopkins University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, Meadville Theological Seminary, and Columbia University.

JOHN P. PETERS,
C. H. TOY,
Committee on Publication

December, 1911

INTRODUCTION

¹Εκ τῶν οὐρανίων τὰ ἐπίγεια ἡρτήται
κατὰ τινα φυσικὴν συμπάθειαν.

PHILO, *De Opificio Mundi*, c. 40.

After a long period of discredit and neglect, astrology is beginning to force itself once more on the attention of the learned world. In the course of the last few years scholars have devoted to it profound researches and elaborate publications. Greek manuscripts, which had remained a sealed book at a time when the quest for unpublished documents is all the rage, have now been laboriously examined, and the wealth of this literature has exceeded all expectation. On the other hand, the deciphering of the cuneiform tablets has given access to the well-springs of a learned superstition, which up to modern times has exercised over Asia and Europe a wider dominion than any religion has ever achieved. I trust, therefore, that I am not guilty of undue presumption in venturing to claim your interest for this erroneous belief, so long universally accepted, which exercised an endless influence on the creeds and the ideas of the most diverse peoples, and which for that very reason necessarily demands the attention of historians.

After a duration of a thousand years, the power of astrology broke down when, with Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, the progress of astronomy overthrew the false hypothesis upon which its entire structure rested, namely, the geocentric system of the universe. The fact that the earth revolves in space intervened to upset the complicated play of planetary influences, and the silent stars, relegated to the unfathomable depths of the sky, no longer made their prophetic voices audible to mankind. Celestial mechanics and spectrum analysis finally robbed them of their mysterious prestige. Thenceforth in that learned system of divination, which professed to discover from the stars the secret of our destiny, men saw nothing but the most monstrous of all the chimeras begotten of superstition. Under the sway of reason the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries condemned this heresy in the name of scientific orthodoxy. In 1824, Letronne thought it necessary to apologise for discoursing to the Academy of Inscriptions on "absurd dreams" in which he saw "nothing but one of those failings which have done most dishonour to the human mind,"¹—as though man's failings were not often more instructive than his triumphs.

But at the end of the nineteenth century the development of history, from various sides, recalled the attention of investigators to ancient astrology. It is an exact science which was superimposed on primitive beliefs, and when classical philology, enlarging its horizon, brought fully within its range of observation the development of the sciences in antiquity, it could not set aside a branch of knowledge, illegitimate, I allow, but indisputably linked not only with astronomy and meteorology, but also with medicine, botany, ethnography, and physics. If we go back to the earliest stages of every kind of learning, as far as the Alexandrine and even the Babylonian period, we shall find almost everywhere the disturbing influence of these astral "mathematics." This sapling, which shot up among the rank weeds by the side of the tree of knowledge, sprang from the same stock and mingled its branches with it.

But not only is astrology indispensable to the *savant* who desires to trace the toilsome progress of reason in the pursuit of truth along its doublings and turnings,—which is perhaps the highest mission of history; it also benefited by the interest which was roused in all manifestations of the irrational. This pseudo-science is in reality a creed. Beneath the icy crust of a cold and rigid dogma run the troubled waters of a jumble of worship, derived from an immense antiquity; and as soon as enquiry was directed to the religions of the past, it was attracted to this doctrinal superstition, perhaps the most astonishing that has ever existed. Research ascertained how, after having reigned supreme in Babylonia, it subdued the cults of Syria and of Egypt, and under the Empire,—to mention only the West,—transformed even the ancient paganism of Greece and Rome.

It is not only, however, because it is combined with scientific

¹ "Rèveries absurdes . . . une des faiblesses qui ont le plus déshonoré l'esprit humain."

theories, nor because it enters into the teaching of pagan mysteries, that astrology forces itself on the meditations of the historian of religions, but for its own sake (and here we touch the heart of the problem), because he is obliged to enquire how and why this alliance, which at first sight seems monstrous, came to be formed between mathematics and superstition. It is no explanation to consider it merely a mental disease. Even then, to speak the truth, this hallucination, the most persistent which has ever haunted the human brain, would still deserve to be studied. If psychology to-day conscientiously applies itself to disorders of the memory and of the will, it cannot fail to interest itself in the ailments of the faculty of belief, and specialists in lunacy will do useful work in dealing with this species of morbid manifestation with the view of settling its etiology and tracing its course. How could this absurd doctrine arise, develop, spread, and force itself on superior intellects for century after century? There, in all its simplicity, is the historical problem which confronts us.

In reality the growth of this body of dogma followed a course not identical with, but parallel, I think, to that of certain other theologies. Its starting-point was faith, faith in certain stellar divinities who exerted an influence on the world. Next, people sought to comprehend the nature of this influence: they believed it to be subject to certain invariable laws, because observation revealed the fact that the heavens were animated by regular movements, and they conceived themselves able to determine its effects in the future with the same certainty as the coming revolutions and conjunctions of the stars. Finally, when a series of theories had been evolved out of that twofold conviction, their original source was forgotten or disregarded. The old belief became a science; its postulates were erected into principles, which were justified by physical and moral reasons, and it was pretended that they rested on experimental data amassed by a long series of observations. By a common process, after believing, people invented reasons for believing,—“*fides quaerens intellectum*,”—and the intelligence working on the faith reduced it to formulæ, the logical sequence of which concealed the radical fallacy.

There is something tragic in this ceaseless attempt of man to penetrate the mysteries of the future, in this obstinate struggle of his faculties to lay hold on knowledge which evades his probe, and to satisfy his insatiable desire to foresee his destiny. The birth and evolution of astrology, that desperate error on which the intellectual powers of countless generations were spent, seems like the bitterest of disillusion. By establishing the unchangeable character of the celestial revolutions the Chaldeans imagined that they understood the mechanism of the universe, and had discovered the actual laws of life. The ancient beliefs in the influence of the stars upon the earth were concentrated into dogmas of absolute rigidity. But these dogmas were frequently contradicted by experience, which ought to have confirmed them. Then not daring to doubt the principles on which depended their whole conception of the world, these soothsayers strove to correct their theories. Unable to bring themselves to deny the influence of the divine stars on the affairs of this world, they invented new methods for the better determination of this influence, they complicated by irrelevant data the problem, of which the solution had proved false, and thus there was piled up little by little in the course of ages a monstrous collection of complicated and often contradictory doctrines, which perplex the reason, and whose audacious unsubstantiality will remain a perpetual subject of astonishment. We should be confounded at the spectacle of the human mind losing itself so long in the maze of these errors, did we not know how medicine, physics, and chemistry have slowly groped their way before becoming experimental sciences, and what prolonged exertions they have had to make in order to free themselves from the tenacious grasp of old superstitions.

Thus various reasons commended to the attention of scholars these old writings of the Greek astrologers so long neglected. They set to work to re-read and to re-publish these repulsive-looking books which had not been reprinted since the sixteenth century. The last edition—and a shockingly bad one—of the *Tetrabiblos* of Ptolemy is dated 1581. Further, a number of unknown authors emerged from obscurity, a crowd of

manuscripts mouldering in the tombs of libraries were restored to light.¹

The profit which can be gained from them is not confined to the science of which they treat and to the adjacent domains, which astrology has more or less penetrated. Their utility is much more varied and general, and it would be difficult to set out in full their manifold applications.²

I shall not dwell on the interest afforded to the scholar by a series of texts spread over more than fifteen centuries, from the Alexandrine period to the Renaissance. Nor, again, will I attempt to estimate the importance which might be claimed in the political sphere by a doctrine which has often guided the will of kings, and decided their enterprises. Nor can I prove here by examples how the propagation of astrological doctrines reveals unsuspected relations between the oldest civilisations, and leads him who traces it from Alexandria and from Babylon as far as India, China, and Japan, bringing him back again from the Far East to the Far West.

So many questions of such varied interest cannot be considered all at once. We must exercise restraint and confine ourselves to one view of the subject. Our object in this course of lectures shall be limited to showing how oriental astrology and star-worship transformed the beliefs of the Græco-Latin world, what at different periods was the ever-increasing strength of their influence, and by what means they established in the West a sidereal cult, which was the highest phase of ancient paganism. In Greek anthropomorphism the Olympians were merely an idealised reflection of various human personalities. Roman formalism made the worship of the national gods an expression of patriotism, strictly regulated by pontifical and civil law. Babylon was the first to erect the edifice of a *cosmic* religion, based upon science, which brought human activity and human relations with the astral divinities into the

¹ See *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Græcorum* (ten volumes published), Brussels, 1893-1911.

² See Franz Boll, *Zur Erforschung der antiken Astrologie* (Neue Jahrbücher f. d. Klass. Altertum), xxi (1903).

general harmony of organised nature. This learned theology, by including in its speculations the entire world, was to eliminate the narrower forms of belief, and, by changing the character of ancient idolatry, it was to prepare in many respects the coming of Christianity.