

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ELEMENTS OF THE BABYLONIAN CONTRIBUTION TO HELLENISTIC ASTROLOGY

In the scientific literature of the Hellenistic period, references to “Chaldeans” in connection with astrology and astronomy are numerous. The implications of such references, for the history of astrology, however, depend on a closer assessment of the nature and extent of the Babylonian contribution to that branch of Hellenistic science, but an assessment based on cuneiform sources. Three elements which are demonstrably Babylonian in origin yet form basic and integral parts of Greek astrological doctrine provide the focus of discussion here. They are: 1) planetary exaltations, 2) the micro-zodiac, and 3) trine aspect. The differences between the Babylonian and Greek use of these three elements are exemplary of the fact that despite the incorporation of Babylonian elements at the inception of Greek astrology, the overall character and rationale of Greek astrology remains entirely a Hellenistic Greek product.

The current general impression that astrology originated in Babylonia may be credited to the Greeks of the Hellenistic age who often cited generic ancients, such as “Chaldeans” or “Egyptians” when some authoritative source on astrology or other esoterica was needed.<sup>1</sup> Momigliano has evaluated the references to older eastern traditions found in some Greek authors this way:

If we have to resort to a generalization about the fortunes of Oriental thought in the Hellenistic world and in its Roman prolongation, we must say that the mass of writings claiming to be translations from Oriental languages were mainly forgeries by writers in Greek. What circulated in Greek under the names of Zoroaster, Hystaspes, Thoth, and even Abraham was quite simply faked, though no doubt some of the writings contained a modicum of ‘Oriental’ thoughts combined with Greek ideas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The putative “debts of Greek wisdom to the East” claimed by Greek authors is reviewed in G.E.R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the origins and development of Greek science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 237f., note 39.

<sup>2</sup> A. Momigliano, “The Fault of the Greeks,” in Momigliano, *Wisdom, Revelation and Doubt: Perspectives in the first millennium B.C.*, *Daedalus* 104 (1975), p. 17.

What is of interest for the present investigation, however, is not so much the Greeks' obtuseness to ancient Near Eastern tradition and thought, but the mere fact of their exposure to it, the results of which can be observed in the history of astrology.

Despite the general awareness of the "Orient" on the part of the Greeks from about the eighth century B.C.E.,<sup>3</sup> evidence for a genuine Greek knowledge of Babylonian history or culture before the Hellenistic period is exceedingly slim. But in the later Hellenistic period, an intensified Greek interest in the ancient scientific traditions of Babylonia begins to be in evidence. The connections made between "Chaldeans" and astrology may represent the continuation of what Momigliano has suggested was a new direction already apparent in the fourth century in which Greeks took a new interest in the East, for example, in Zoroaster, the Magi, or the Egyptian traditions later compiled under the fictitious authorship of Hermes Trismegistus, all of which eventually became associated in the same way with all sorts of speculation having to do with astrology.<sup>4</sup>

But the vague attributions of occasional "theories" to "Chaldean astrologers" that may be found in a number of Hellenistic scientific works do not in and of themselves provide reliable historical sources for the determination of the origins and sources of astrology.<sup>5</sup> What must be assessed in the light of cuneiform evidence is the degree to which the Greeks understood Babylonian celestial divination as well as astronomy. The adaptation and transformation of several elements from each of these Babylonian traditions (divination and astronomy) to the new science of astrology provides the means for such an assessment.

Before discussing selected examples of some elements of Greek astrology traceable in cuneiform texts, a number of fundamental distinctions between Babylonian celestial divination and Greek horoscopic astrology should be clarified. It is only in the light of these significant differences that the parallels between the two systems may be put in proper perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> See A. Kuhrt, "Assyrian and Babylonian Traditions in Classical Authors: A Critical Synthesis," in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn*, Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient Bd.I Teil 2 (Berlin, 1982), pp. 539-40.

<sup>4</sup> See Momigliano, "The Fault of the Greeks," p. 16, and see also id., *Alien Wisdom The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 143-47.

<sup>5</sup> HAMA, pp. 607-10.