A review of the publication of E.S. Drower’s *The Book of the Zodiac*\(^1\) appeared in the premiere journal for the history of science in the United States, *Isis* vol. 41 of 1950, written by George Sarton, the founder and editor of that journal from 1913–1952. The review probably would no longer be remembered, but for Otto Neugebauer, who contributed a now famous one-page reaction in *Isis* vol. 42, entitled “The Study of Wretched Subjects.” There, Neugebauer said, “when the recognized dean of the History of Science disposes of a whole field with the words ‘the superstitious flotsam of the Near East,’ he perhaps does not fully realize how much he is contributing to the destruction of the very foundations of our studies: the recovery and study of the texts as they are, regardless of our own tastes and prejudices.”\(^2\) Indeed, the content of the Mandaean *Asfar/Šfar Malwašia* (henceforth SM) bears rich testimony to many astrological doctrines widespread wherever Hellenistic astrology held currency, and in some areas, preserved long after the Greco-Roman period.

While the historical significance of astrology in the Hellenistic, late Antique, and Mediaeval periods may have been seen primarily in terms of its role as the major vehicle for the transmission of astronomy, its intrinsic interest and importance as a source for ancient cultural belief systems is equally significant. The extraordinary longevity of the acceptance of astral influence as a law of the cosmos and the fluidity of the cultural transmission of forms of this belief is demonstrated by the fact that originally Mesopotamian elements may be traced in a work such as the SM, whose own origins seem to be Sasanian, although to my knowlege no extant copies antedate the 19th century. The earliest copy used by Lady Drower is a manuscript in the Bibliotheque

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Nationale dated to 1212 A.H., but her major source was completed in 1247 “according to the computation of the Arabs,” as it is stated in the text, or 1869 C.E. The manuscript concludes with the statement of the date of copy and the note that the text is a “compilation from a Greek miscellany (of) calculations about the stars and horoscopes and information about what there is in the heavens according to days, months, and years.”\(^3\) As Drower observed, “Arabic, Greek, Persian, and Pahlevi writers probably drew upon older material. In some passages references to the ‘King of kings’ and mention of certain place-names indicate a Sasanian epoch, and much of the folklore and magic is a heritage from Babylon.”\(^4\) This paper discusses in a most preliminary way some Babylonian astrological and divinatory elements in the Mandaean SM. Before proceeding to Babylonian parallels and sources, however, it will be useful to outline the contents of the SM, and to say something about other influences evidenced in this work.\(^5\)

The SM is a compilation from various sources of astrological and divinatory content and arranged in two major parts. Generally speaking, Part I, in 20 chapters, presents a guide to astrological analysis of human beings, that is, their physical attributes, abilities and weaknesses, as well as the various activities undertaken by people (marriage, travel, etc.). In addition, there are spells against demons and guidelines for illnesses occurring throughout the year (with respect to the calendar and the zodiac), horoscopes and much general astrological instruction representing standard Greek astrological doctrine. Chapter 14 is an example of “historical astrology,” a Sasanian theory that important historical and religious moments, such as the Flood, or the coming of a prophet, can be predicted (or reconstructed) on the basis of astrological indications, such as planetary conjunctions or cycles of years.\(^6\)

In SM, predictions for “the world” are presented parallel to those of the individual person, e.g., in the first line of that section, “When the beginning of the year comes to ‘the life’ of the world and falls in Aries, with Mars as ruling star, this is predicted about it,” and so on (SM 179). The last five chapters of Part I collect various omens which may be described as meteorological, astral, and at the end, a few

\(^{3}\) SM 238, Drower p. 197.
\(^{4}\) Drower, p. 2.
\(^{5}\) It should be clear that I have relied entirely upon Drower’s translation of SM.