

THE SEVEN BODIES OF MAN IN HERMETIC ASTROLOGY

by Denis Labouré

(translated from the French by Michael Edwards)

The Advent Of Astrology

Stars and planets, being the visible image of the gods, were consulted from remotest antiquity. Between the 18th and 15th centuries BCE priority was accorded to unusual phenomena, such as eclipses or the appearance of comets and shooting stars. In the beginning the diviners' judgements were concerned with the fate of the country.

Celestial omens were not applied to *individuals* until the very end of Babylonian civilisation, around the 5th, 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, when planetary positions at the moment of birth began to receive consideration in predicting events destined to occur during the course of existence (the earliest nativity so far discovered appears on a cuneiform tablet dating from 410 BCE).

In Alexandria, in Hellenised Egypt, astronomers, Neo-Platonic philosophers and Hermeticists systematised and developed this hitherto fragmentary *genethliacal* astrology (from Greek *genethle*: birth). To the original Babylonian astrology, preoccupied with the planets' movements and positions in the zodiacal constellations, they added further doctrines, such as our so-called *houses* and *aspects*. Thus was born Greek astrology, which embarked on its triumphal march across the world, spreading from the Roman Empire as far as the Indian subcontinent.

But what was the source of genethliacal astrology's power of attraction? Why was it accepted throughout the entire known world, to the point of eclipsing in the minds of our contemporaries the ancient forms of Urania's art?

Chaldean Theology

The basic doctrine of genethliacal astrology rests for the most part on an astral theology attributed to the Babylonians (though in fact largely developed by the Graeco-Romans), transmitted to Rome by Julian the Chaldean¹ and his son, Julian the Theurgist, during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE). Both were authors of the *Chaldean Oracles*, teachings adopted by the Neo-Platonic philosophers, notably Porphyry and Iamblichus (3rd and 4th centuries CE). The aphorisms of the *Chaldean Oracles* have since been reconstituted from commentaries and quotations made by early pagan and Christian authors.

According to Chaldean teaching:

- - The planetary spheres were conceived as a series of concentric spheres extending as far as the sphere of the zodiac of fixed stars, with the Earth held fast at the centre.
- - Sublunary bodies (between the Earth and the Moon's orbit) are of mixed nature: they are formed of varying blends of the four ever-interchanging elements, earth, water, fire and air, and so are subject to generation and corruption.
- - Bodies situated beyond the lunar orbit are, on the contrary, formed of pure fire or of a fifth quintessence whose designation (ether) derives from the unceasing motion of its essence (*tein aei*: ever running). It follows that all celestial bodies are incorruptible. With respect to the Earth, their ranking is defined by their period of revolution round the zodiac: the slower the star's motion, the further it is from the Earth. This supposition fixed the 'Chaldean Order' referred to from the 2nd century BCE onward.²

Each of the spheres was presided over by a god, as listed below, starting from the first sphere encircling the Earth:

- - the sphere of the lunar goddess Hecate, described by the Moon's orbit;
- - the sphere of Hermes, described by the planet Mercury's orbit round the sphere of the Moon;
- - the sphere of Aphrodite, described by the planet Venus' orbit embracing the sphere of Mercury;
- - the sphere of Apollo - that of the Sun - containing the spheres of the Moon, Mercury and Venus;
- - the sphere of Ares (Mars);
- - the sphere of Zeus (Jupiter);
- - the sphere of Chronos (Saturn);
- - lastly, the seven planetary spheres (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn) were embraced by an eighth, the sphere of the fixed stars comprising the Zodiac;
- - then came the spheres situated beyond the planets: the sphere of the gods who reside beyond the planetary spheres; the sphere of the Demiurge in charge of creation; and the sphere of the First Intelligence. Finally, beyond the universe thus far expounded, the Creator of the world, He Whom the *Chaldean Oracles* name 'Father'.³

¹ The word 'Chaldean' originally referred to the priestly caste of Babylon, but later designated their Greek and Egyptian disciples. The stamp of Greek philosophy and astronomy had much modified and developed the original Babylonian teaching.

² This is likewise the order followed by the rulers of the planetary hours, the rulers of the Egyptian decans (sometimes referred to as 'faces'), and the planets on the Tree of Life in the Jewish Kabbalah.

³ Metaphorically, the 'Creator' is the architect who designs the universe and whose plan, the 'First Intelligence', is followed by the

that make it feel and imagine; Venus moves it with desires; from the sphere of Mercury it takes the power to express and enunciate what it thinks and feels; finally, from the sphere of the Moon, it acquires the strength needed to propagate by the generation and increase of bodies. This lunar sphere, which is last and lowest with respect to divine bodies, is first and highest with respect to earthly bodies. This lunar body, as it were the sediment of celestial matter, at the same time is found to be the purest substance of animal matter." (Ch.XII)

This teaching underlies the practice of genethliacal astrology as it was originally conceived. In the nativity the 'Chaldeans' saw a chart of the astral bodies, as the journey through the planetary spheres had structured them. Correctly interpreted, this chart would reveal the native's constituent parts, material or more subtle. It would speak of his daimon, the guardian angel who would accompany him on his voyage here below and watch over the fulfilment of his fate⁴. It would describe, therefore, the earthly existence which had devolved upon him.

The Ascension Of The Soul

The *Poimandres*, first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, reveals what happens at death and after death. In order to return in pristine purity to the divine, the soul must effect a divestment, in reverse order, of the astral raiment it has donned. The soul first quits the material element encountered in the last place, namely the stuff of nature, that is the body furnished by nature. In the last place it quits the first material element encountered in its fall, namely the astral vestment of the highest sphere. Death entails a sequence of effects:

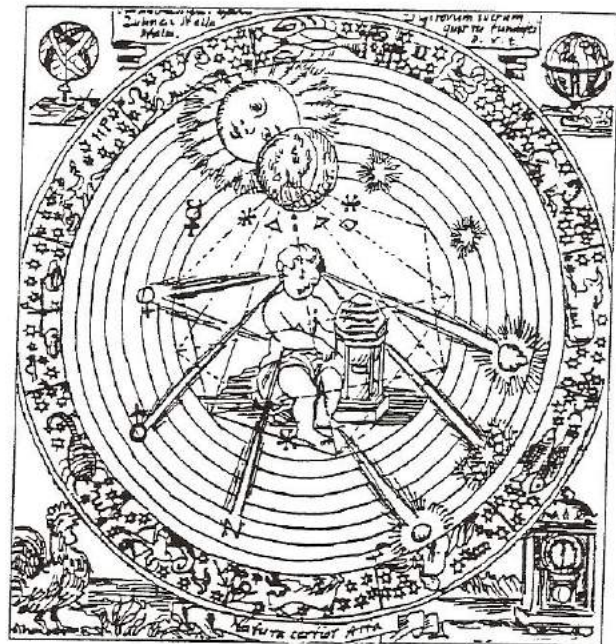
- - the body is consigned to dissolution, and the visible form disappears;
- - the temperament (subject in each case to the individual blend of the four elements), henceforth inert, is consigned to the personal daimon (the guardian angel which, at birth, takes charge of the newborn);
- - the bodily senses return to their respective planetary sources.
- - ire and lust, irrational passions, revert to unreasoning nature.

After this first divestment, the soul begins its ascension. Soaring upward through the armature of spheres, it casts off at each station the passion assumed there in the course of its descent: at the 1st station (Moon), the faculty of increase and decrease; at the 2nd (Mercury), malice and cunning; at the 3rd (Venus), the illusion of desire; at the 4th (Sun), the passion for command; at the 5th (Mars), audacity and temerity; at the 6th (Jupiter), the lust for wealth; at the 7th (Saturn), the falsehood that ensnares.

"And thereupon, stripped of the vestments generated by the armature of spheres, the logos enters the ogdoadic essence (the 8th heaven, of pure ether, pure light), having nought now save its own power." (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1.26).

⁴ Note the origin of the expressions 'astral body' and 'sidereal body'.

⁵ Certain philosophers considered this fate inexorable. Neoplatonic philosophers and hermeticists were not so rigid. Recognising its existence, they were able to loosen certain of its constraints. Iamblichus (in *The Mysteries of Egypt*) recalled that the particular character of the personal daimon was judged according to the strongest planet in the nativity, and around 263-8 AD Porphyry wrote: "Blessed is he who, knowing his geniture and ipso facto his own daimon, exorcises fate."



The Geocentric System

Beyond the threshold of the world stands the firmament (from the Latin *firmamentum*: pillar, support), the vault of heaven, pillar of the stars, named 'sphere of the fixed stars'. The Earth, or rather the observer is located at the centre. The Moon is the nearest planet. She receives and transmits to the observer the action of all the other celestial agencies. Then, from the nearest planet to the furthest: Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn.

But it mounts yet higher, to the very Powers divine who reside above the ogdoadic essence. It becomes in turn a Power, and enters into God.

"For such is the blessed consummation for those possessed of gnosis: to become God." (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1.26).

This ascension to the Powers divine is not, however, automatic, the spheres being equally obstacles impossible to overcome. Since the soul's existence as a human being determines the heaven it can attain upon divestment, it risks being unable to traverse one or other of the spheres and plunging back into terrestrial existence. By fasting and prayer, by sacred rites and the aid of mediating powers (gods for the Greeks or Egyptians, angelic hierarchies for the medieval magi) incarnate man can ease from here below his divestment and his inner transmutation.

The Divestment Of The Metals

"Seven are the passages to perfection of matter,"

— wrote Cagliostro in the *Catechism for the Apprentice of the Egyptian Lodge*. Like many other alchemists, Pernety speaks of 'washing', adding that this involves passage through the seven planets, effected by seven successive workings which lead from the different states of Mercury, symbolised by the alchemical metals, to the state of gold.⁶ In

the light of what has just been expounded are such texts illumined⁷.

To be admitted to initiation in the Masonic Order, the layman must divest himself of his metals. Since each metal belongs to a planet this divestment must be intended to show the shedding of the planetary vestures, that the being may contemplate the true light.

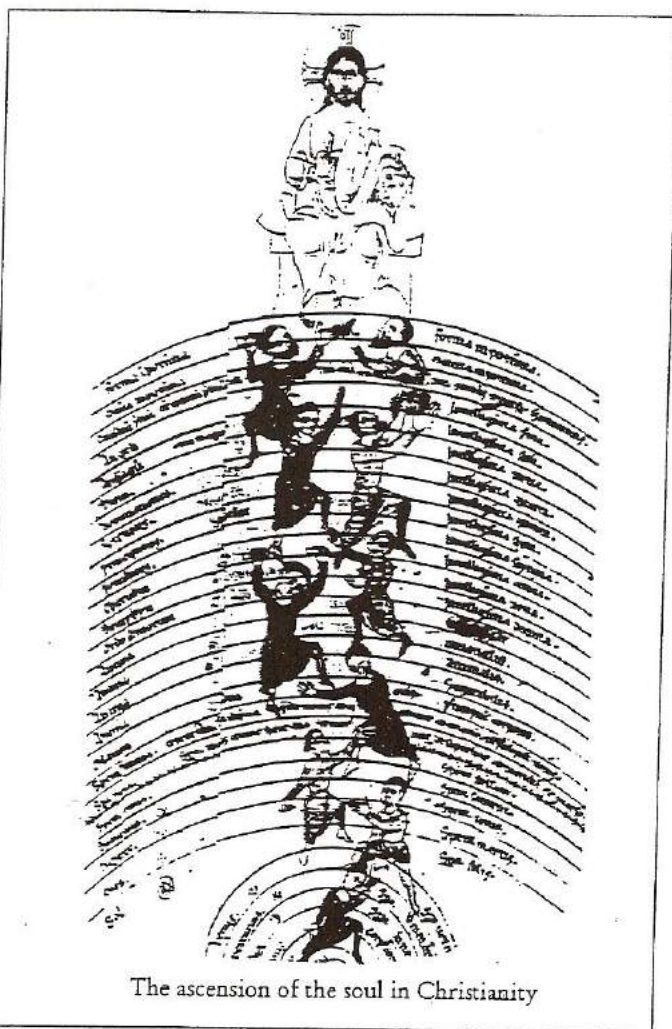
At the 28th Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite,⁸ likewise adopted by the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis-Misraim, the candidate is made Knight of the Sun. During a first part of his initiation he is regaled successively in seven cloaks of different colours, draped round him by the seven ministrant angels of the seven planets. During a second part, he divests himself of each of these cloaks. He is at last allowed to contemplate the Sun.

The Attitude Of Christianity

(Taken for the most part from R. Powell's excellent *History of the Planets* — see bibliography)

Christianity tried to eliminate paganism but in fact half the Chaldean doctrine was Christianised. The soul's descent into incarnation was discarded, but its ascension post mortem through the planetary spheres was retained. For the pagan gods presiding over the planetary spheres Christian teaching substituted the celestial hierarchies described in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. These hierarchies were conceived of in ascending rank, each attributed to a planetary sphere: Angels - sphere of the Moon; Archangels - sphere of Mercury; Principalities - sphere of Venus; Powers - sphere of the Sun; Virtues - sphere of Mars; Dominions - sphere of Jupiter; Thrones - sphere of Saturn; Cherubim - sphere of the zodiac of fixed stars; Seraphim - sphere of crystal. It was considered that after death the human soul reascended the planetary spheres to attain the Empyrean. There, beyond the planetary spheres and the sphere of fixed stars, sat the Holy Trinity. Dante's *Divine Comedy* depicts this ascension of the soul through the planetary spheres and the corresponding ranks of the different hierarchies.

Christianity has recognised the principle of the soul's survival and reascension through the planetary spheres after death. Ancient Chaldean theology recognised in addition the soul's pre-existence and descent through the planetary spheres into incarnation. One simple gesture would have allowed the two teachings to merge in harmony. This was undertaken only by certain gnostic, kabbalistic and initiatory communities.



The ascension of the soul in Christianity

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Translator's Note:

*English versions of these texts are available. The two titles by the author, like his other excellent works on traditional astrology of east and west, have not as yet been translated into English.



⁶ See also Marconis, J.-Et. *Travaux Complets Des Sublimes Maitres Du Grand-Oeuvre* (Complete Labours of the Sublime Masters of the Great Work), Paris, 1866, p.25: "The second goal was to seek the means to redeem matter, which it was believed had also fallen; the seven metals, each of which bore the name of a planet, formed the ascending ladder of material purification corresponding to the moral ordeals of the seven heavens;..."

⁷ These texts remain incomprehensible to the astrologer unversed in the vision of the world that presided at their formulation. The hermetic conception of astrology stands at the very antipodes of the psychological astrology generally practised in Europe at the close of the 20th century. The latter's aim is to get man to make the most of the conditioning and 'potential' with which he is born. The goal of hermetic astrology is, on the contrary, to aid man to divest himself of this conditioning and potential, thus to witness the transformation of an existence and a universe into ever brighter reflection of the divine flame which abides beyond the planetary forces. The psychological thrust of modern astrology is the quest for happiness on earth; the metaphysical thrust of traditional astrology is the quest for freedom in heaven. The real question for the astrologer is not "to what extent is it more-or-less possible to use my free will to live best?", rather "I recognise the power of the conditioning which girds my inmost being. Can I regain my freedom and, if so, how?" This is the question answered by spiritual and initiatory techniques of all times.

⁸ The earliest textual versions of the Degree of Knight of the Sun date from the end of the 18th century. Essentially they represent a mode of instruction in alchemy. Revisions made in the second half of the 19th century accentuate the astrological interpretation.