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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

SCIENCE—OR ASTROLOGY?

By E. H. BLAKENEY.

WHEN religious faith is declining, various forms of freak religions have a curious fascination for a certain type of mind. To-day we are witnessing a recrudescence of ancient Gnosticism—that inveterate foe of Christianity—in many strange shapes and under many disguises. Theosophy has a vogue in unexpected quarters. Spiritism reckons its followers by the hundred thousand. Nor has this persistent quest of the occult left those “who profess and call themselves Christians” unscathed—and this, despite the Apostolic warning against the “vain talkings” of a false *γνώσις*. Mascots are to be found everywhere. The users of these things may elect to laugh, rather shamefacedly, at them in public; but secretly they indulge the fancy that “there may be something in it after all.” Even less reputable incursions into the realm of magic will not be looked for in vain. Flirting with the false supernatural has become the fashion; and, if rumour is not a lying jade, the cult of Black Magic is practised in all the great cities of Europe and elsewhere, London itself not excepted. In addition to these and kindred cults, we are confronted by the costly advertisings of Pyramid cranks, Joanna Southcott devotees, and so on; while lectures and addresses by British-Israel crotcheteers, and—much more dangerous—by the queer folk posturing as “Christian” Scientists (with Mrs. Eddy for their inspired Sibyl) are incessant.

And now Astrology is coming once more to the front, as the Astronomer Royal has lately reminded us, and the recent gathering of the astrologers in a famous holiday resort has indicated. One might have supposed that this hoary superstition had long since been ousted by exact science, and followed Odin and Zeus to equal doom.¹ But it is not so. Astrology has had a long and, in some respects, a distinguished career; so much so that Astronomy has been designated its sister. Admittedly we owe something to the seers of ancient Babylon (the greatest centre of this pseudo-science), who, under a cloudless sky, patiently mapped out the heavens, noted eclipses, and marked the rising and setting of constellations. It was rightly asserted, by Comte, that the study of astrology was the first systematic effort to frame a philosophy of history by reducing the apparently capricious phenomena of human actions within the domain of law. The belief in astrology may even have, to some extent, enhanced man’s dignity, but it tended to thrust God from His conduct of affairs, everything being pre-determined by the action of celestial bodies. Yet, despite

¹ It has been asserted, apparently on good authority, that Hitler has decided leanings towards this superstition. That would account for much, if it could be proved to be a fact.

this, it must be remembered that the purpose of the ancient astrologers was not scientific but magical; their aim was to forecast the future, and, on the basis of their observations, to demonstrate that the whole course of human life was governed by star and planet. Poets have, for artistic ends, made play with all this, and our language bears many traces of astrological lore. Yet few remember this fact when they speak of being born under a lucky star, or of having embarked on an ill-starred enterprise; of someone having a jovial manner, a mercurial temperament, or a saturnine expression.

The ancient Jews, in many cases, imagined that the planets influenced human destiny, though, officially, this belief was discouraged. In the Old Testament there is, perhaps, only one *certain* reference to astrology; this will be found in Isaiah xlvi. 13, where the prophet is mocking at "the astrologers, the star-gazers, and the monthly prognosticators" (evidently Old Moore's Almanack must have had some sort of counterpart in the times of Isaiah).¹ Possibly, though not certainly, the word "signs" in Genesis i. 14 (lxx. gives *σημεία*) may have an astrological significance. It seems clear that celestial forecasts were not unfamiliar to the Hebrews; but the opposition to such forms of divination—as Pinches has pointed out—was owing, in great part, to the fact that, as monotheists, they had no wish to refer to practices which suggested heathen cults. It is interesting to note a reference to astrology in the case of the Star of the Nativity. The star seen by the Magi was regarded as a portent only by professed astrologers. There is no necessity to suppose that this star was a comet, or even a star of exceptional brilliancy (*cf. Encycl. Biblica* 4785).

To the primitive Greeks astrology was almost unknown; that it became known at a later period—for the Stoics were firm believers in astrology—was owing to the subtle and contaminating influences of the Orient. The Romans, in their best days, appear to have had no dealings with it; but in imperial times it became increasingly fashionable, an impulse having been given to its study by the Emperor Tiberius. Readers of Tacitus may recollect a brief but interesting passage in the *Histories* (i. 22); and there are hints to be found in Horace, and something more than a hint in Juvenal. In official quarters it was not customary to look with favour on astrologers or their craft, the presumption being that the practice of astrology, and the drawing of horoscopes, were in the nature of a political menace. At an early date of the empire Augustus ordered the books of the astrologers to be burnt, while subsequent emperors improved upon this by banishing the professors of the cult.

The Christian Church never countenanced, in its official capacity, any dabbings with the forbidden thing. The passage in Acts xix, describing a literary *auto-da-fé* at Ephesus, shows the effect of Christian teaching on some of those who were wont to practise magical arts: doubtless among the books burnt were handbooks of astrology and formulas for casting horoscopes.

It is worth recalling to mind that Augustine, at one period of his life, had decided leanings toward astrological speculations, but re-

¹ Is there an astrological reference in Judges v. 20?

nounced all confidence in this pseudo-science after his conversion, as we learn from the seventh book of the *Confessions*. Lactantius denounced the whole business as daemonic in its inception; and probably most of the Church Fathers concurred with him; Origen was a possible exception.

Not till the advent of the scientific study of nature did astrology slowly begin to beat a retreat. Bacon sounded a right note when, in the *de Augmentis*, he declared that it was so stuffed with superstition that scarcely any sane doctrine could be found in it. Presumably, there is to-day no scientific man of any acknowledged eminence who would venture to hold a brief for astrology. Yet the cult still persists, as certain publishers' catalogues appear to indicate. Not long since, when passing through a crowded thoroughfare in London, I noticed a number of hawkers on the pavement selling pamphlets on popular astrology and apparently doing a tidy business in disseminating this nonsense.

False creeds are often tolerated, or laughed at, on the ground that they do no harm. But is that so? Occultism, in its protean shapes, may do great mischief, especially among the young, the thoughtless, and the half-educated. It is therefore regrettable that some of our newspapers regularly devote space to advertising the cult of astrology and print paragraphs of forecasts—political and otherwise—for the delectation of a curious or deluded public. The "fatalism" inseparable from astrology cannot be otherwise than harmful. Superstition is the shadow of religion. Unluckily many people take the shadow for the substance.