Astrology: Do the Heavens Declare the Destiny of Man?

Dr. Michael Gleghorn critically examines the claim of astrology that the heavenly bodies somehow influence, or even determine, events on earth.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A Brief Historical Introduction

Astrology is based on the notion that the heavenly bodies somehow influence, or even determine, events on earth. It is believed that an accurate understanding of these heavenly influences, especially at the time of one's birth, can give us insight into a person's character and destiny. Although belief in astrology is very ancient, it continues to have many adherents even in our own day. One writer estimates that as many as one quarter of the world's population "believe in and follow astrology to some extent."{1} Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from such beliefs. Estimates indicate that anywhere from ten to thirty percent of those claiming to be "born again" Christians entertain some belief that astrology is true.{2}

Although there is some scholarly disagreement over when the western system of astrology originated, astrologer Robert Parry observes, "Conventional scholarship leans toward the view that astrology began in the old Mesopotamian civilizations of the Middle-East sometime around the second millennium B.C."{3} At this time there was no distinction between astrology and astronomy. However, "because centers of learning were also . . . centers of religion, natural astrology soon became corrupted by pagan myths, deities, and magic. As a result, two forms of astrology began to coexist: natural astrology ([or] astronomy) and religious

astrology."{4} It was "the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy . . . [who] refined astrology to its present form in the second century A.D."{5} It is this brand of astrology that has most influenced the West. But it is by no means the only form in existence.

Ancient astrological systems differing from our western variety were developed both in China and India—as well as elsewhere. But not only do these systems differ from ours, they also differ from each other. Furthermore, within each of these three major systems, we also find many contradictory subsystems.{6} For example, "Not all western astrologers agree that there are 12 zodiacal signs. Steven Schmidt in his book *Astrology 14* claims . . . a total of 14 signs. But some argue for only 8, others for 10, and a few for 24."{7} It was doubtless these many differences that led astrologer Richard Nolle to admit that there are nearly as many astrological systems as there are astrologers!{8}

But don't all these differences affect astrology's reliability? After all, won't different systems give different results? Indeed they will. For instance, one astrologer may predict that you'll have a wonderful marriage; another that you'll never marry—you might easily receive contradictory readings from different astrologers! And the law of non-contradiction says they can't both be right (though they could both be wrong). It is for reasons such as these that we should be hesitant about placing our faith in astrology.

Difficulties in Chart Interpretation

"The basis of all astrological work is the Birth Chart. This is an accurate map of the sky for the exact date, time and place of birth. . . . [T]his can be the birth of a person . . . a nation . . . or even of an idea or question."{9} Once the astrologer has such information, he is ready to begin interpreting the chart. But what sort of information is most relevant to chart interpretation?

Although we cannot cover all the details, the astrologer is primarily concerned with examining the planets, houses, and signs—and how these are related to one another. Thus, astrologer Robert Parry writes, "[E]ach planet has a distinct and definite character which is modified by the sign and house in which it is placed. Mars, for example, is the planet of aggression, extraversion, self-confidence and sexuality."{10} The "signs" are the twelve signs of the zodiac. "Everyone is . . . born under one of these . . . signs (Pisces the fish, and so on)."{11} Finally, "the *houses* are the 12 divisions of the zodiac that are said to correspond symbolically to every area of life . . . the planets are said to travel through the houses, influencing each area of life as they do."{12}

But the astrologer must not only pay attention to the planets, houses and signs, he must also note their relationships to one another. For instance, "Angular relationships between planets are . . . very important. These relationships are called 'aspects' . . . a Square (90-degree) aspect between two planets indicates tension or disagreement . . . whereas a Trine (120-degree) aspect indicates sympathy and cooperation."{13}

Interpreting a birth chart is thus a very complex affair. Indeed, one astrologer "calculated the *least* possible number of different combinations resulting from the most basic . . . chart . . . [as] roughly equivalent to the estimated number of atoms in the known universe!"{14} And such complexity is just one of many difficulties.

Another is that not all astrologers agree on the number of signs that need to be considered in interpreting a chart. While most acknowledge twelve, some think there are *less* and others *more* than this. There are also differences regarding where the various houses should be placed on a chart. And clearly such differences will lead to conflicting interpretations.

Finally, there is the problem of *authority*.{15} What factual basis do astrologers have for asserting that the Square aspect indicates disagreement, while a Trine indicates cooperation? Why do some astrologers consider Saturn a "bad" planet and Jupiter a "good" planet? How does the astrologer know "that the first house represents personality, the second . . . money [and] . . . the eighth . . . death?"{16} Since such assertions appear to be arbitrary, it follows that results will be arbitrary as well. One should, therefore, be wary about accepting the advice of astrologers—at least when they're speaking *as astrologers!*

The Problem of Twins

In his book, *In Defense of Astrology*, Robert Parry attempts to defend astrology against the twelve most common objections that are usually raised against it. Let's consider just one of these: the problem of twins.

Some twins are born within minutes of each other, yet they may lead very different lives. But if one's character and destiny are largely determined by the positions of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth, we would expect twins to be remarkably similar in these respects. Clearly, however, this is not always the case. Even Parry admits that one twin may die quite young while "the other lives on to a ripe old age."{17} As an astrologer, how does he deal with this difficulty?

He begins by observing, "Even a few minutes can make a lot of difference to a birth chart."{18} He then argues that even when one twin dies while the other lives, "the same event, namely death, has entered both lives at the same time. One twin dies . . . the other is touched radically by the sorrow . . . of . . . death."{19} He concludes, "Surely this is an argument for, rather than against astrology."{20} But how convincing is this argument, really?

While it may be true that a few minutes can occasionally make a big difference to a birth chart, this is clearly not always the case. Indeed, some scholars state that even "a birth interval of several minutes would make no real difference."{21} Second, there is surely a very big difference indeed between someone actually dying on the one hand, and someone losing a loved one to death on the other. It seems undeniable that the destinies of two such people are radically different. Surely this constitutes a legitimate objection to the ability of astrology to predict a person's destiny.

Additionally, for those of us who accept the authority of the Bible, it's instructive to contemplate the lives of Jacob and Esau, twins born so close to one another in time that Jacob came out of the womb "with his hand holding on to Esau's heel."{22} Astrology would expect these two men to have very similar personalities and destinies. But did they?

The Bible records, "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man living in tents."{23} In addition to being quite different in personality and temperament, they were different physically as well. Esau was a hairy man, but Jacob a smooth man.{24} But most importantly, the destinies of both men, as well as their descendents, were drastically different. God bestowed His special favor on Jacob, but rejected Esau declaring, "I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau."{25} Surely if astrology were true, one would not expect twins born at virtually the same time to be so thoroughly different in both their character and destiny.

Astrology and Science

Numerous studies have attempted to test the claims of astrology. The scientist most often cited by astrologers as having furnished "proof" for some of its ideas is the late French psychologist Michel Gauquelin. Astrologer Robert Parry writes:

> Gauquelin's results are remarkable. For instance, the traditionally energetic and aggressive planet Mars is shown quite conclusively to be more frequently strong in the charts of sportsmen than chance would normally allow. . . . These professional attributes tend, moreover, to be in line with traditional astrological law, which has always associated Mars with competitive spirit.{26}

Gauquelin's results are known as the "Mars effect." He claimed to have found evidence for this effect in "a study that attempted to test whether or not the birth dates of 2088 sports champions were 'statistically significant' according to the position of Mars."{27} Ironically, although some slight evidence for this effect was indeed noted, Gauquelin "did not consider it an astrological effect."{28} Moreover, although frequently cited as lending validity to the subject, he "never claimed to validate traditional astrology in any sense."{29}

Still, he did claim to find some evidence for the "Mars effect." Doesn't this lend some credibility to astrology? Not necessarily. "The problem for astrologers is that the 'Mars effect' has never been confirmed in 30 years of subsequent studies."{30} One of the most damaging studies in this regard was published in 1995 by a team of French scientists. After an exhaustive twelve-year study, the team's "attempt to independently replicate Gauquelin's findings failed; it offered 'no evidence for the Mars effect.'"{31} Since this "effect" is generally considered strong confirmation for the truth of astrology, it seems that scientific support for the subject is quite hard to come by.

But aren't there other tests for the validity of astrology? For instance, don't all the predictions made by astrologers offer a means of testing the subject's accuracy? Indeed they do, but the results are usually quite unconvincing. While successful predictions may sometimes occur, as a general rule, "published predictions . . . seem to have a worse record than client self-disclosures."{32}

In a study conducted between 1974-79, over 3,000 predictions by such alleged astrologers as Jeane Dixon and Carroll Righter were examined. The number of failures was 2673—almost 90 percent! Moreover, "the astrologers . . . were given the benefit of the doubt for any prediction that could have been attributed to shrewd guessing, vague wording, or inside information."{33} Without such benefits, the failure rate would have been almost 100 percent! The authors of the study concluded, "The results . . . paint a dismal picture . . . for the . . . claim that 'astrology works'."{34}

Astrology and the Bible

What does the Bible say about astrology? According to one astrologer, "The Bible is full of the philosophy of astrology."{35} But when one carefully examines the passages thought to speak favorably of astrology, one is bound to conclude with Drs. Bjornstad and Johnson: "Absolutely NO scriptural passage supports astrology . . . not a single reference even indicates tolerance of this art."{36}

The Bible condemns faith in astrology as futile and misplaced. In Jeremiah 10, God issues this warning: "Do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens although the nations are terrified by them; for the customs of the peoples are vanity."{37} God is both the Creator and sovereign Ruler of the heavens; people are therefore to trust and fear Him—not what He has made.

Unlike God, astrology is powerless to deliver those who trust in it. In Isaiah 47, "God condemns Babylon and tells of its impending judgment."{38} In verse 13 He says, "Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you." But that their efforts would be in vain is clearly seen in the concluding words of the chapter, "There is none to save you."{39} Whatever predictive power astrology has, it is utterly eclipsed by the power of the sovereign Lord

who created and rules all things!

Finally, in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, astrology comes under the same condemnation as all other forms of divination. There are likely many reasons for this, but let me mention just one. If the ideas of astrology are largely discredited, what accounts for its sometimes-remarkable predictive power? The Bible, as well as the frank admissions of some astrologers, indicates supernatural, or spiritual, involvement. But if God condemns astrology, what sort of spirits are we talking about? Though it may be unpopular to say so, the Bible suggests they are demons.{40} And it's eerie how many astrologers actually attribute their predictive powers to the wisdom of their spirit guides. One professional astrologer of twelve years confessed: "I never met a really successful astrologer . . . who did not admit . . . that spiritism was the power behind the craft."{41} Could it be that astrology works (when it works) not because of its discredited and contradictory ideas, but because of the unseen power of the spirit world? If so, God's condemnation of astrology may be partially motivated by a concern to protect people from the influence of such evil spirits.

In conclusion, the heavens do not declare the destiny of man, but the glory of the God who made them.{42} It is God, not the heavens, "who works all things after the counsel of His will."{43}

Notes

1. Lawrence E. Jerome, *Astrology Disproved* (Prometheus Books: Buffalo, NY, 1977), 1, cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Harvest House Publishers: Eugene, Oregon, 1996), 54.
2. For instance, Ankerberg and Weldon mention a Gallup poll cited by the National and International Religion Report for July 4, 1988, which "estimated that ten percent of evangelical Christians believe in astrology" (Ibid., 54). Additionally,

Chuck Colson cites a figure from Wade Clark Roof's book, *Spiritual Marketplace,* indicating that a third of "born again" Christians believe in astrology ("The Feng Shui Way: The Paganization of Our Culture," *Jubilee Extra* [October 2001]: 7).
3. Robert Parry, *In Defense of Astrology: Astrology's Answers to its Critics* (Llewellyn Publications: St. Paul, Minnesota, 1991), 37.
4. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Victor Books: Wheaton, Illinois, 1990), 152.
5. Ibid., 154.
6. Ankerberg and Weldon, 58.
7. Boa, 158.
8. Richard Nolle, *Critical Astrology: Investigating the Cosmic Connection* (American Federation of Astrologers: Tempe, AZ, 1980), 22, referenced in Ankerberg and Weldon, Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs, 58.
9. Parry, 24.
10. Ibid., 31.
11. Ankerberg and Weldon, 55.
12. Ibid.
13. Parry, 31-32.
14. Ankerberg and Weldon, 57.
15. Boa, 158.
16. Ankerberg and Weldon, 56.
17. Parry, 88.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Boa, 160.
22. Genesis 25:26.
23. Genesis 25:27.
24. Genesis 27:11.
25. Malachi 1:2-3; see also Romans 9:10-13.
26. Parry, 188.
27. Ankerberg and Weldon, 60.
28. Patrick Grim, ed., *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*

(State University of New York Press: Albany, NY, 1982), 33-46; cf. pp. 55-60, referenced in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 60.
29. Ankerberg and Weldon, 60.
30. Ibid.
31. "French Committee Announces Results of Test of So-Called Mars Effect," *Skeptical Inquirer* (January-February, 1995), 62, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 60.
32.Ankerberg and Weldon, 63.
33. Ibid.
34. R.B. Culver and P.A. Ianna, *The Gemini Syndrome: A Scientific Evaluation of Astrology* (Prometheus Books: Buffalo, NY, 1984 Rev.), 169-70, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 63.
35. Joseph F. Goodavage, *Astrology: The Space Age Science* (Signet: New York, 1967), XI, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 64.
36. James Bjornstad and Shildes Johnson, *Stars, Signs and Salvation in the Age of Aquarius* (Bethany House: Minneapolis, MN, 1976), 43, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 67.
37. Jeremiah 10:2-3a.
38. Boa, 161.
39. Isaiah 47:15
40. See in particular Acts 16:16-18.
41. Personal correspondence from Karen Winterburn to John Ankerberg and John Weldon, cited in *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 71.
42. See Psalms 19:1 and 8:3, as well as Genesis 1:16.
43. Ephesians 1:11.

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