



# Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Science of Omens and the Knowledge of the Heavens

By Michael Baigent

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## Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Science of Omens and the Knowledge of the Heavens By Michael Baigent

A detailed study of the earliest forms of astrology in Mesopotamia and their far-reaching hermetic influences from the Renaissance to the present day

- Reveals the roots of modern astrology in the Babylonian science of omens, which was concerned not with individuals but with the state and king
- Explores Mesopotamian mythology as it relates to the planets and to astrology
- Traces the hermetic transmission of this knowledge over the centuries from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Renaissance Italy

Among the many significant discoveries excavated from Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's royal library in Nineveh were tablets documenting the development of Mesopotamian astrology, now recognized as the earliest astrological science.

Drawing upon translations of the Nineveh library tablets as well as many other ancient sources, Michael Baigent reveals the roots of modern astrology in the Babylonian science of omens. He explains how astrology in the Babylonian and Assyrian empires was concerned not with individuals but with the king and the state. He shows that by the first dynasty of Babylon, around 1900 to 1600 BC, astrology had become a systematic discipline, the preserve of highly trained specialists intent upon interpreting omens from the movements of planets and stars. He explores Mesopotamian mythology as it relates to the planets and to astrology as well as to Mesopotamian religion, magic, and politics--for the mythology of Babylon and Assyria served the state and thus changed as the state changed. He shows how this ancient form of astrology uniquely represents both Sun and Moon as masculine entities and Saturn (Ninurta) as the principle of order imposed on chaos. He examines the connections between ancient astrology and the symbolism of Western religions, such as how the "Greek" or "Templar" cross may symbolize the Babylonian god Nabu, now known as Mercury.

Tracing the hermetic transmission of this knowledge over the centuries from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Florence, Baigent reveals how the religious and magical aspects of early Babylonian cosmological speculation played a significant role in the Renaissance, influencing prominent figures such as Cosimo de Medici, Marsilio Ficino, and Botticelli.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Bold scholarship at its best! Michael Baigent’s *Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia* should honor everyone’s library.” (Robert Bauval, author of *Secret Chamber Revisited*)

“Michael Baigent was one of the most studious yet open minded historians of modern times. *Astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia* stands the test of time and remains essential for every bookshelf.” (Andrew Collins, author of *Göbekli Tepe: Genesis of the Gods*)

#### About the Author

Michael Baigent (1948-2013) was a researcher and writer best known for his book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, coauthored with Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. He appeared in many documentaries on the origins of Christianity, Freemasonry, and the Grail legends. He was the editor of *Freemasonry Today* from 2001 to 2011 and the author or coauthor of 14 books, including *The Jesus Papers*, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, and *The Messianic Legacy*.

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### The Royal Library of Nineveh

The contents of the libraries of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, perhaps numbering some 25,000 tablets, fall into several distinct sections. One section comprised the royal administrative reports--up to 3,000 letters to the king from his advisers, including astrologers--that give a wealth of information on Assyrian religious, medical, political, and military life. A second section contained the official histories detailing the political events during the king’s reign; here were found not only the relatively durable clay tablets but also a substantial number of clay cylinders containing historical texts. A great number of these simply fell to pieces upon being brought into contact with the air, and thus their information was lost.

Another section of the library held a collection, perhaps definitive, of Assyrian mythology and literature; there were also some 200 tablets devoted to the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, comprising a type of dictionary, and a section of some 300 tablets added a remarkable collection of specialized omen texts that were arranged in a canonical series. Finally, there was a group of commercial texts, contracts, no doubt retained for the same archival reasons as would pertain today.

Archaeologists soon discovered that the Assyrians, and the Babylonians before them, were devoted to the various arts of divination. The basis of this devotion lay in their ancient cosmological beliefs regarding the nature of the universe and the task of mankind.

For the Mesopotamians, earth and the heavens above were not separate domains but were two parts of the one realm. Earth and heaven were complementary; one depended upon the other and both were equally important. There was no concept, for example, of earth being in any way lesser than heaven. Indeed, while they believed that the omens studied by their specialist diviners were messages sent from the gods, these messages, these omens, could just as easily be drawn from events upon the earth as events witnessed in the skies. This point is made very clearly in a manual for diviners that was recovered by archaeologists: “The signs in the sky, just as those on the earth, give us signals.”

The second key point to understanding the attitude of the Mesopotamians is the discovery that, from the very earliest times, they viewed mankind as being, in part, divine; born of the very substance of the gods; created of their divine “flesh and blood.” The story of the Babylonian Noah, Atra-Hasis, dating from the early second millennium BCE, explains:

*Let Nintu mix clay, That god and man  
May be thoroughly mixed in the clay,  
So that we may hear the drum for the rest of time  
Let there be a spirit from the god's flesh.*

The third factor in understanding this view of the universe is the ancient belief that the task of mankind was to serve the gods:

*Create Lullu [man] that he may bear the yoke.  
Let man carry the toil of the gods.*

Thus it was vitally important to know precisely what the gods required. This is no doubt why they saw the night sky with its constellations as the *Shitir Shame*--the “book of heaven,” upon which was written the commands of the gods.

The Mesopotamians saw all anomalous phenomena as divine communications that might be read by the trained diviner. In consequence these diviners, members of a specialist intellectual fraternity attached to the palace or temple, devoted their time to the interpretation of such omens drawn from a vast range of natural phenomena. For these experts celestial events, the movements of clouds, the direction of winds or shooting stars, the birth of malformed animals or children, the occurrence of lightning, thunder, earthquakes or floods, were never gratuitous; all had significance, all potentially revealed the desires of the gods, if only they could be read correctly. And to read them correctly was the task of the diviner.

While we cannot be dogmatic about anything when dealing with these ancient concepts, as we shall see, such omens were evidently conceived of as being but signs of a possible future, not portents of some irrevocable coming event. The future--the will of the gods--was negotiable, was malleable, was never, it seems, considered to be fated as we understand this term today.

Each of the various techniques for interpreting omens had its standard texts, its own specialized literature. For example, the texts concerning divination from unusual births were compiled into a standard series called the *Shumma izbu* (“If a newborn animal . . .”), from the opening line of the first text cited. Those diviners who drew omens from the observation of unusual animal behavior had the series *Shumma alu ina mele shakin* (“If a city is situated on a hill . . .”); the medical exorcists had their series, *Enuma ana bit marsi ashipu iffiku* (“If the exorcist is going to the house of a patient . . .”); and the astrologers had their great series, the *Enuma Anu Enlil* (“When the gods Anu and Enlil . . .”).

Detailed analysis of the astrological tablets in the library quickly revealed two important facts: first, that astrology developed over a long period of time, the tablets from Nineveh representing the state of the study just prior to the fall of the Assyrian empire and the subsequent influx of foreign philosophies; and second, that the astrology found in these tablets and in the reports made to the king is what is known as mundane astrology, that is, concerned not with the individual but with the king and the state. Nowhere do any individual birth charts appear nor are they referred to in any text. Similarly the zodiacal signs are absent, as is any concept of the ascendant, even though both have been integral to astrology since Classical times. The obvious conclusion is that they were a later development, forming no part of the techniques practiced by the

Assyrian and Babylonian astrologers and thus proof of the long development period of the techniques used by modern astrologers.

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