

RIDICULING ASTROLOGERS ORIGEN’S SOURCES AND HIS LEGACY

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Abstract. This article examines the early Christian critique of astrology, focusing on its perceived conflict with the concept of free will. Key figures such as Origen, Tatian, and Bardesanes are highlighted for their contributions to this discourse. Origen’s works, including his homilies and commentaries on the Book of Genesis, notably oppose the deterministic implications of astrology by asserting human free will and divine omnipotence. Tatian’s writings, particularly his “Oratio ad Graecos,” condemn astrology as a demonic invention that undermines Christian doctrines. Bardesanes, who is well-informed in astrology, differentiates between cosmic influences and moral decisions, arguing that ethical behavior is not determined by the stars. The article also explores the theological and philosophical foundations of these arguments, tracing influences from earlier thinkers like Philo of Alexandria and Carneades. Overall, the text provides a comprehensive analysis of how early Christian writers engaged with and refuted astrological beliefs.

Keywords: Origen, Astrology, Free Will, Early Christian Writers, Determinism

Astrology was criticized already by the earliest Christian writers because in some of its tenets they saw the denial of the existence of free will in human beings². The problems concerning astrology appeared obviously in the exegetical works on the *Book of Genesis*, because in the Hexaemeron also the celestial bodies are mentioned among the beings created by God.

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² On the arguments for and against fatalism in Greek antiquity see David AMAND, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l’antiquité grecque*, Louvain, Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1945.

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I. Origen's exegetical works on the Book of Genesis

Origen wrote both a series of homilies and a commentary on the *Book of Genesis*. His *Homiliae in Genesim*, which are fully extant, exerted a considerable influence on later authors of Christian antiquity³. Origen's *Commentary on Genesis* survived only partially in the *Philocalia*⁴. According to an ancient tradition the texts of this anthology were selected by Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. In Chapter 23 the problems regarding astrology⁵ are discussed in detail. Gen 1,14 says that the duty of the luminous bodies ordered by God is to serve as signs (ἔστωσαν εἰς σημεῖα). Astrologers claimed that by "reading" these "signs," *i.e.*, in their mind by observing and interpreting the constellations of the heavenly bodies, they can predict the fate of every human being.

II. The passages of the *Philocalia* on the impracticability of astrology

Chapter 23 of the *Philocalia* can be divided into five parts. In the introduction Origen gives an overview about the topic, then he presents four problems, in connection with which he explains his own opinion. Concerning the first problem, he asserts that free will *can* be reconciled with God's foreknowledge. As to the second problem, he proves that stars are only the *signs* of the future events and not their causes. Then he claims that for human beings cultivating astrology would mean that they are expected to make calculations which are practically impossible. Finally, he declares that God made it possible only for the angels and Patriarch Jacob to read out the signs from the constellations of the stars. Finishing the discussion of the topic he admits that he cannot answer the question how angels can interpret the constellations of the stars. In short, he treats the following four topics: the problem of fatalism, the theory of astrology, the practice of astrology, and the astrology of the angels.

³ See Adam RASMUSSEN, *Genesis, and Cosmos. Basil and Origen on Genesis 1 and Cosmology* (The Bible in Ancient Christianity, 14), Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2019. Chapter 5 (pages 148-194: „Let them be for signs”: Astrology.) is devoted to the issues concerning astrology.

⁴ See ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie 21-27. Sur le libre arbitre. Introduction, texte, traduction et notes par Éric Junod* (SC, 226), Paris, Cerf, 1976, 36-39.

⁵ About astrology in antiquity and its Christian reception see Giulia SFAMENI GASPARRO, *Astrology*, in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, Volume One, A–E, Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Academic, 2006-2008, 271.

The borderline between what we nowadays mean by astrology and astronomy was not clearcut in antiquity: the interpretation of the constellations of stars was regarded as an objective scientific activity by many. So, astrologers claimed that they were in possession of the necessary skills to interpret the heavenly signs mentioned in Gen 1,14, and they alleged that these σημεῖα do influence the fate of people. Origen completely rejected fatalism, which was mostly accepted by astrologers. He proves that just like prophecies are not the causes of their own fulfilment, the heavenly bodies cannot be the causes forming the fate of human beings, either.

In order to follow Origen's train of thought and see his expertise in astronomy and astrology, the 17th and 18th subdivisions of Chapter 23, which treat of the impracticability of the astrological calculations allegedly carried out by human beings, are worth being quoted in their entirety:

“17. We conceded the point, for it does not interfere with the reasoning, that men can understand the positions of the stars in the heavens (τοὺς οὐρανίους σχηματισμοὺς), the signs, and the things of which they are signs; now let us see if it is true. Well, then, the masters of this art say that anyone who is going to accurately cast a nativity (τὴν γενεθλιαλογίαν ἀκριβῶς καταλαμβάνειν) must know not only in which twelfth part of the Zodiac the star in question is, but also in what part of the twelfth part, and in which of its sixty parts; and the more careful calculators add, in which sixtieth of that sixtieth. And the observer, they say (φασί), ought to do this in the case of each one of the planets, investigating its relation to the fixed stars. He must, moreover, scanning the eastern horizon, observe not only which sign of the Zodiac is there, but also the part of the sign, and the sixtieth part of this part, whether the first or second sixtieth. How, then, since an hour, roughly speaking, is equivalent to half the twelfth part, can anyone ascertain the sixtieth part, unless he has a corresponding scale for the division of the hours? For example, who could know that such an one was born at the fourth hour, plus half an hour, plus a quarter, plus an eighth, plus a sixteenth, plus a thirty-second of an hour? For they say (ὥς φασί) it makes a great difference in the things indicated if there is an error, not of a whole hour, but even of a fraction of an hour. Anyway, in the birth of twins there is frequently only a momentary interval; and yet, according to them, the twins differ widely in their fortunes and performances, because they who were thought to have observed the hour were not quite correct as to the relation of the stars, and the part of the sign on the horizon. For no one can say to the thirtieth of an hour what the

interval between the two births is. But let us allow (ἔστω συγκεχωρημένα αὐτοῖς) that they are able to determine the hour.

18. There is a well-known theorem (Φέρεται δὴ θεώρημα) which proves that the Zodiac, like the planets, moves from west to east at the rate of one part in a hundred years (δι' ἑκατὸν ἐτῶν μοῖραν μίαν), and that this movement in the lapse of so long a time changes the local relation of the signs; so that, on the one hand, there is the invisible sign, and on the other, as it were, the visible figure of it; and events, they say, are discovered not from the figure, but from the invisible sign; though it cannot possibly be apprehended. But let us grant (Ἔστω δὴ καὶ τοῦτο συγκεχωρημένον) that the invisible sign can be apprehended, or admit the possibility of getting at the truth through the visible sign; still even they will admit their inability to preserve in due proportion what they call the 'blending' of the signs (σύγκρασιν παρ' αὐτοῖς καλουμένην) in these positions, for it often happens that the influence of a malignant star which appears is more or less weakened by the aspect of a more benign one; and again, that the weakening of the influence of the malignant star by the aspect of the benign one is hindered, because of some particular position and relation of the other, though it is indicative of evil. And I think that anyone who studies the passages must despair of understanding such matters, inasmuch as the knowledge is not disclosed to men (οὐδαμῶς ἀνθρώποις ἐκκειμένην), but at the most only goes as far as the indication of events. And any one who has had actual experience will know that speakers and writers more frequently fail than succeed in their guesses at the truth. Wherefore Isaiah, believing that these things cannot be discovered by men, says to the daughter of the Chaldeans, who above all others were professors of the art, 'Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, stand up and save thee; let them tell thee what shall come upon thee'. We are thus taught that the most learned in these matters cannot show beforehand what the Lord intends to bring upon every nation"⁶.

From the passages above it seems to be clear that in Origen's mind the most efficacious argument against astrology is that astrologers in fact cannot overcome the practical obstacles when they try to define the exact moment of the birth of a person. The first problem is that although it is not difficult to observe in which

⁶ George LEWIS (tr.), *The Philocalia of Origen. A compilation of selected passages from Origen's works made by St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Basil of Cæsarea*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1911, pp. 190-192. The insertions in Greek are taken from ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie* 21-27, p. 188, p. 190, p. 192, p. 194.

zodiacal sign the star in question was when the child was born, it is necessary to measure not only the degree, but also the minutes of the degree, and even the degree seconds as well, because we know that the lives of twins often take very different turns, even if there is only a few minutes difference between the exact moments of their coming into the world. The famous work of the Stoic writer, Marcus Manilius titled *Astronomica* also confirms that the astrologers were of this opinion⁷.

The celestial phenomenon which causes the second difficulty mentioned by Origen was observed by Hipparchus around 129 BC. He observed that the star named Spica (*Azimech, Alpha Virginis*) in his era was observable in the zodiacal sign of the Virgin, at degree 174. But Hipparchus was in the possession of another observation made around 300 BC by Thimocharis, who was also a renowned astronomer. According to his measurement about 170 years before that of Hipparchus Spica was observable at degree 172. So, it was Hipparchus who first described the phenomenon of the so-called precession, *i.e.*, that the point of equinox is wandering into the Western direction. As our text proves, Origen also knew about this phenomenon, which once again demonstrates that he possessed quite detailed astronomical knowledge.

His third argument against astrology also betrays that he was well-versed in astrology. In the mind of astrologers some stars carried bad omens, and some other ones were the signs of good fortune. However, sometimes the bad signs can hide the good signs or the other way around, which causes unsurmountable difficulties in the interpretation of their constellations. Here Origen uses an astrological term (σύγκρασις), which again proves that he was at home not only in astronomy, but also in astrology.

III. Origen's seemingly permissive attitude to the statements of astrologers

When treating of these issues, at first sight Origen's behaviour seems to be quite permissive because he uses these expressions: ἔστω συγκεχωρημένα αὐτοῖς; Ἐστω δὴ καὶ τοῦτο συγκεχωρημένον. Although he does not make a laughingstock of the so-called science of his opponents openly, through his apparent permissiveness he renders perceptible that the arguments of the astrologers cannot be taken

⁷ MARCUS MANILIUS, *Astronomica* 1 (2,57): *quantaque quam parui facerent discrimina notus*; on Manilius see John ROBERTS (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, 447. See also A. RASMUSSEN, 166-167.

seriously when they claim that they are able to overcome the obvious difficulties arising from the practice of their alleged science. When he presents the difficulties one after the other, he always refers to the statements of astrologers themselves (φασι, ὡς φασιν, σύγκρασιν παρ' αὐτοῖς καλουμένην). So, in his attack against astrologers it is not necessary for him to refer to an external authority, because the astrological “professional” literature itself demonstrates that the statements of the alleged experts themselves collapse without any external intervention, and their arguments fall to pieces.

IV. The main source of Origen's arguments: sceptic philosophy

We can find similar arguments already in the writings of the previous critics of astrologers, especially in the work of Sextus Empiricus⁸, titled *Adversus Mathematicos*. This famous sceptic philosopher lived approximately from 160 to 210 AD, so he was an older contemporary of Origen. Unlike Origen, he ridicules the fruitless efforts and alleged science of the Chaldeans with a scathing sneer. He is of the opinion that the life of each person starts with conception. In his mind the exact determination of the moment of conception would be the perfect starting point to cast a good horoscope, but when we are trying to do so, we face insurmountable difficulties, which are mockingly listed in detail by Sextus Empiricus. The determination of the exact moment of birth did not appear impossible for the Chaldeans, as he calls the astrologers. However, immediately the question props up which moment of the process of birth we should regard as relevant to determine exactly the positions of stars. The detailed examination of the various possibilities opens a new eventuality for Sextus Empiricus to have a good laugh at the astrologers. The exact moment of the process of birth is regarded as the most relevant by the astrologers must certainly be reported to the person who is measuring the angles of the positions of the stars and is determining exactly their constellation. So, in his opinion there must be a person present by the side of the woman in labour to hit a gong in the precise moment to let the observing person know that the baby has been brought into the world. But even in this case

⁸ Sextus Empiricus was a doctor of medicine and an outstanding representative of sceptic philosophy. His works, the *Basic Lines of Pyrrhonism* and *Adversus Mathematicos* (*Against the Professors*) are usually regarded as the codification of scepticism. On his life and works see SIMON BLACKBURN, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, 349-350.

the inexactness of the measurement is obvious, says Sextus, because – in order to carry out the exact measurement – the astrologer should take a position on a high hill, so quite far from the person by the side of the mother. But we all know the phenomenon that when we see somebody felling a tree on the top of a hill, we actually hear the sound considerably later than seeing the axe cutting the tree, so even transmitting the information by hitting the gong cannot be exact.

In his mind it causes another problem that the universe is turning round with an unbelievable speed. Another difficulty arises if the child is born in daytime when the constellation of stars cannot be observed. By night, our observations might be more or less exact, unless the sky happens to be cloudy. Still another difficulty is that the borderlines of the zodiacal signs cannot be clearly figured out. He knows also about the phenomenon of the atmosphere that its layers can be of uneven density, so the actual position of the celestial bodies – e.g., that of the Sun – is not exactly the same as its observed position. Listing further difficulties makes it clear that the Chaldeans in fact cannot determine the exact moment of the birth of a particular child, consequently they are unable to foresee what the fate of the child is going to be like⁹.

V. The biblical and theological arguments of Philo and the Christian authors before Origen against astrology

The reliability of the astronomical measurements had already been questioned in the second century BC by Carneades¹⁰, the founder of the so-called New Academy. His most important target was to refute the fatalistic argumentation of his contemporary Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus¹¹. His arguments soon became part and parcel of the debates directed against astrology.

Later also a theological argumentation based on the *Bible* appeared, the most eminent representative of which was Philo of Alexandria. He emphasized that the stars cannot be the primary causes of the events, because – referring to divine

⁹ Robert Gregg BURY (tr.), *Sextus Empiricus with an English translation*, IV. *Against the Professors*, Cambridge/Mass. – London, Harvard University Press – William Heinemann LTD, 1987, 342-361.

¹⁰ On Carneades (c. 214-129 BC), 'the most prominent member of the later Academy after Arcesilaus', see S. BLACKBURN, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 55-56.

¹¹ On Chrysippus (c. 280-207 BC), who was the third leading Stoic after Cleanthes, see *ibid.*, 63.

revelation – the renowned Jewish exegete made it clear that only God can be the primary cause (who is above this world) and not the stars¹².

Christian authors utilized both the philosophical and the theological arguments formulated before the Christian era to attack astrology. According to Éric Junod until the beginning of the third century we can find only summary judgements about astrology. In *Didache* III, genethliology, *i.e.*, the casting of horoscope of a child at his or her birth, is mentioned in connection with prediction and magic, which all lead to idolatry. According to Ignatius of Antioch (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 19,3), the star heralding the birth of Christ signified the end of the rule of fatalism, and that of the forces of ignorance and wickedness.

As to the Greek apologists, Aristides does not treat of astrology in detail, but he rejects of the adoration of stars of the Chaldeans. Justin does not mention anything in connection with astrology, but his disciple, Tatian does ridicule the astrologers. In Junod's mind, however, his argumentation is not clear, but there are three topics which are outlined in his *Oratio ad Graecos*: astrology is a work of the demons, it leads to polytheism, and the death of Christ has liberated us from the yoke of fate.

In Junod's opinion we can find a kind of specified evaluation and disapproval of astrology based on exact knowledge of the astrological technical expressions only at the beginning of the third century. The arguments of the Christian authors betray only from that period on that they are in possession of some reliable knowledge of the astrology, which enables them to argue against the Chaldeans with more confidence. In his work titled *Excerpta ex Theodoto* Clement of Alexandria relates the arguments used by the Valentinian Theodotus, who distinguishes between the expressions ποιειν and σημαίνειν. Theodotus states that the stars themselves do not exercise an influence on anything. They only signal the influence of the ruling powers. Just like the flights of birds do not cause any future events: they are only the signs of them. Like Ignatius, Theodotus also explains that the arrival of Christ has brought about the cessation of the power of fate, but in his mind only for those who have been baptized (*Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 72,1; 74,1-2; 75,1).¹³

The famous Syrian personality, Bardesanes of Edessa¹⁴ (154-222/3) was without doubt proficient in astrology. He was somehow connected to the leading political

¹² ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie* 21-27, 36-39.

¹³ ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie* 21-27, 41-42.

¹⁴ On this famous scholar see this monograph of abiding value: Han J. W. DRIVERS, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1966; reprint: Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies (36), Piscataway, NJ., Gorgias Press, 2014.

circles of the kingdom of Osrhoene, also called the kingdom of Edessa. When the Romans occupied Edessa in 214 or 216, he was forced to flee to Armenia, where he lived until his death. His ideas concerning astrology survived only in a work titled *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, written by one of his disciples, a certain Philip.¹⁵ Starting from this it seems that in his opinion it is God the Creator who rules the world, but he has delegated his power to the planets and the constellations of the Zodiac, which can give poverty or power, good or bad fortune to everybody. However, they cannot influence moral decisions. In his mind this is proved by the fact that the customs of various nations are often similar, although they were born not under the same constellations of stars. The interpretation of this phenomenon, called νόμιμα βαρβάρικα, appears already in the sceptic philosophy of Carneades.

In the *Pseudo-Clementina* we can also find similar arguments. The source of this work is obviously *The Book of the Laws of Countries*: a long quotation from it appears in this work attributed to the bishop of Rome, Clement¹⁶.

The Fourth Book of the *Refutatio omnium haeresiorum*, once attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, treats astrology in detail and contains a long quotation from the *Adversus Mathematicos* of Sextus Empiricus. The author gives a list of the gnostic groups which accepted some ideas of the astrologers¹⁷.

VI. A closer look at Tatian's sharp criticism

Tatian (c.120-172) was a representative of the Christian generation before Bardesanes. He was also born in Syria and published a gospel harmony in Syriac with the title *Diatessaron*, which was in liturgical use until the middle of the fifth century. He is known also as a Christian apologist, who wrote his *Oratio ad Graecos* in the 170s. In this work he also rejects fatalism, which he regards irreconcilable with Christianity. He attributes the invention of the chart of the constellations to the demons, whom he identifies with the gods of the Greeks, just like his master, Justin does. He treats questions which have to do with astrology in three chapters (8th, 9th, and 11th) of the *Oratio*. These passages are not so lengthy as the chapters containing Origen's objections, but despite of their terseness they bear evidence

¹⁵ Its bilingual edition: Han J. W. DRIJVERS (ed.), *The Book of the Laws of Countries. Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, Assen, Van Gorcum & Comp. N. V., 1965.

¹⁶ ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie* 21-27, 42-44.

¹⁷ ORIGÈNE, *Philocalie* 21-27, 45.

to his thorough knowledge of the crucial tenets of astrology, which is especially apparent in his use of the specific terms of astrology.

“8. Men became the subject (ὑπόθεσις) of the demons’ apostasy. For they showed men a chart of the constellations (διάγραμμα ... ἀστροθεσίας ἀναδείξαντες), and like dice-players, they introduced the factor of fate (τὴν εἰμαρμένην εἰσηγήσαντο) – a very unjust one – which brought both judge and prisoner to where they are now. Murderers and their victims, rich and poor, are children of fate, and every nativity (πᾶσά τε γένεσις) gave entertainment as a theatre to the demons, among whom, like ‘the blessed gods’ of Homer, ‘unquenchable laughter arose.’”¹⁸

We can notice some technical terms of astrology already in this chapter. He uses the word ἀστροθεσίας, which is a technical term of astrology, meaning the operation in which the celestial bodies are being put on the horoscope. This term appears already in *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 74,2.

In the next chapter we can find even more special astrological expressions:

“9. Such are those demons who defied fate. Their basic principle was the giving of life. Things that crawl on the earth, things that swim in the waters, and four-footed creatures on the mountains, among whom they lived after the life of heaven was closed to them, to these they paid celestial honors so that they might themselves be thought to dwell in heaven, and might also make rational by arrangements of the stars the irrational ordering of life on earth (ἵνα τε νομισθῶσιν αὐτοὶ διατρίβειν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλογον ἐπὶ γῆς πολιτείαν εὐλογον διὰ τῆς ἀστροθεσίας ἀποδείξωσιν). So the active and the lazy, the controlled and uncontrolled, the rich man and the beggar, all belong to those who ordained their nativity (τῶν νομοθετησάντων τὴν γένεσιν). For the diagram of the Zodiac circle is a creation of the gods (ἡ γὰρ τοῦ ζῳδιακοῦ κύκλου γραφὴ θεῶν ἐστὶ ποίημα), and when the light of one of them is in the ascendant (τὸ ἐπικρατήσαν), as they term it (ὡς φασιν), it loads the dice against the majority, until the cycle brings the loser on top once more. The seven planets, acting like draught players, amuse them. But we are above fate, and instead of planetary (i.e., erring) (πλανητῶν) demons we have come to know one lord who does not err; we are not led by fate and have rejected its lawgivers”¹⁹.

¹⁸ Molly WHITTAKER (ed.), *Tatian: Oratio ad Graecos and fragments*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 14-15. The insertions of the texts in Greek are also taken from this edition.

¹⁹ WHITTAKER, 16-19.

As we can see, Tatian portrays the gods of the Greeks as wicked dice-players. Later he says that the seven planets, whose erratic movements the astrologers try to describe, play at draughts on the diagram of the Zodiac circle, and the gods (*i.e.*, the demons) entertain themselves by watching them. So, like Origen, Tatian also casts doubts on the abilities of astrologers, often making fun of their obviously futile efforts, by which they act in complicity with the demons.

It is Tim Hegedus who calls our attention to the fact that Tatian applies an expression which has also an astrological meaning: τὸ ἐπικρατήσαν. This term means the starting point based on which the calculation of the length of time of one's life is allegedly possible. Like Origen, Tatian also makes the reader aware that he is not giving his own opinion but quotes the statements of the astrologers: ὡς φασιν (as they term it).

For someone who is not an expert on the terminology of astrology the references found in Chapter 11 are even more hidden.

“11. (...) ‘Die to the world’ by rejecting its madness; ‘live to God’ by comprehending him and rejecting the old birth (τὴν παλαιὰν γένεσιν παρατιούμενος). We were not born to die, but die through our own fault. Free will has destroyed us; born free, we have become slaves; we have been put up for sale because of sin. God has done nothing bad, it was we who exhibited wickedness; but we who exhibited it are still capable of rejecting it”²⁰.

The expression παλαιὰ γένεσις has a double meaning here. Referring to the John 3,3.7 it means the natural birth, which can be followed by a kind of “second birth”, the re-birth in Christ. But it can also mean the old doctrine of genethliology. Tatian professes that the old and antiquated concept of astrology should be left behind by Christians for ever.

As obvious from the examples above, with the use of astrological terminology Tatian demonstrates that he himself was an expert on astrology to some extent, but he regards it as pseudo-science. When in Chapter 9 he presents how the astrologers are trying to describe the uncertain orbit of the planets (πλανῆται), which is a good piece of entertainment for the demons, who do not show any sympathy towards the fates of human beings, he seriously questions if astrologers really know their job. In his own way he also ridicules their vain efforts harshly, like Sextus Empiricus

²⁰ WHITTAKER, 22-23.

and Origen do, this way also mocking their faith in unchangeable fate, which both he and Origen regard irreconcilable with Christianity²¹.

In his comprehensive monograph about the relationship of early Christianity and ancient astrology, Tim Hegedus deals also with the other arguments against astrology in antiquity, not only with the one about the impracticability of the astrological measurements. He dedicates a whole chapter to the view that astrology is the result of the machination of the demons, which was – as we have seen – also asserted by Tatian. In the second main part of his monograph, he treats in detail the most important Christian works which contain the Christian reflections about horoscopy. Although he does not devote a separate chapter to Tatian, it is apparent also from his analysis that this author of Syrian origin was thoroughly acquainted with the technical terms which were most cherished by astrologers. As we saw in one case above, some of these technical terms had a primary, plain meaning, which phenomenon makes it even more difficult to notice their hidden meaning, used only by the astrologers. It is true that because of their conciseness Tatian's allusions and his train of thought are difficult to follow indeed, as Éric Junod contends. However, we cannot accept his statement that – as is the case of the Christian authors before Tatian – the Syrian apologist treats the issues concerning astrology only in a superficial way. The texts quoted above testify that he was in the possession of the most important propositions of the astrologers. He is the first Christian author to put into words the essence and the motive of the Christian answer: genethliology, *i.e.*, casting horoscopes is a harmful pseudo-science, which questions the fundamental truths of divine revelation, especially that God created man as a rational being endowed with free will, who is responsible for his deeds. So, decades before the Syrian Bardesanes and the Alexandrian Origen Tatian recognized the dangers which were menacing his contemporary Christians who were enticed by the seemingly scientific statements of the astrologers. He – like his near contemporary Sceptic philosopher, Sextus Empiricus – joined battle against them with the weapons of sarcasm, making fun of their unfounded theses.

²¹ Timothy HEGEDUS, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (Patristic Studies, 6), New York, Peter Lang, 2007, 125-126.; see also A. RASMUSSEN, 148-185.

VII. Tatian, Bardesanes, and Origen as Christian representatives of the same philosophical tradition

Given the chronological possibility (Tatian lived between c. 120 and 172, Bardesanes between 154 and 222/3), the geographical proximity (both were Syrians), and the lack of linguistic barriers (both wrote works also in Syriac), the question may arise if we can find traces of influence by Tatian on Bardesanes. As we have read in the passage of Chapter 8 of the *Oratio ad Graecos*, Tatian's most important objection against astrology is that by teaching it to human beings the demons "introduced the factor of fate (τὴν εἰμαρμένην εἰσηγήσαντο)". Eusebius of Caesarea testifies (*Church History*, 4.33.2) that Bardesanes wrote a dialogue with the title Περὶ εἰμαρμένης. So he dedicated a complete work to this topic, which indicates that he was also concerned with this topic. Unfortunately, it seems that we can gather information about his knowledge of astrological measurements only from the work of one of his disciples. *The Book of the Laws of Countries* argues against the Chaldeans with the method mentioned above, *i.e.*, νόμματα βαρβάρικα, which had been applied already by Carneades. Tatian's argument based on the inability of the astrologers to measure the erratic movements of the planets, *i.e.*, the impracticability of astrology comes from the same tradition of sceptic philosophy. I think the least we can say about their possible connections is that both were in possession of some elements of this philosophical tradition, which was articulated against their common concern, the fatalism of Stoic philosophy.

As to the personal connection between Bardaisan and Origen (c.185-c.254), let me quote the opinion of Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, who summarizes the results of her research on this possibility in the following way:

"These affinities between Bardaisan and Origen, who may have known each other—perhaps through Julius Africanus, or through Clement who might have had Bardaisan as a teacher, or through some other channel—have been so far overlooked by scholarship, whereas I think that they are important and are worthy of investigation. This would also explain the reason why, among many sources on Bardaisan, all those which are philo-Origenian (Africanus, Eusebius, Didymus, the early Jerome, etc.) are also those which are best disposed toward Bardaisan"²².

²² Ilaria L.E. RAMELLI, *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation*, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press, 2009, p. 327.

So it seems likely that they Bardaişan and Origen met in person, which means that they also could exchange ideas about the dangers caused by the fashionable pseudo-science of astrologers.

VIII. Making good use of Origen's arguments: Basil and his followers

As to Origen's legacy, his influence on Basil was examined in detail by Adam Rasmussen in a recent article²³. He finds five correspondences between Origen's texts and those of Basil in his sixth hexaemeral homily²⁴. Basil draws on the *Philocalia* text directly four times. In the first instance he takes over Origen's definition of genethliology (the casting of nativities). Rasmussen notes that "[t]he only significant difference is that Basil replaces the technical word 'wandering' (πλανωμένων) with 'moving' (κινουμένων). This change is consistent with his less technical approach, as compared to Origen's, perhaps symptomatic of the difference between a sermon and a commentary"²⁵. The second borrowing concerns the system of genethliology, in which even the briefest intervals cause the greatest differences between the fates of persons. Basil takes over Origen's explanation almost verbatim²⁶. Basil relies also on Origen when he describes the interactions between the planets, using a technical term: aspect (ἐπίβλεψις). In the view of astrologers, they can be beneficent or maleficent, depending on the angles of their positions. Rasmussen notes that "Basil presents the theory as either stupid or blasphemous, whereas Origen uses it as another argument for impracticability"²⁷. Basil ends his diatribe with emphasizing that the fatalistic outlook of astrologers undermines morality because it removes personal responsibility. While in Origen's

²³ Adam Rasmussen, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen in His Polemic against Astrology*, in *ZAC* 18 (2014), no. 3, 471-485.

²⁴ Its latest text edition, which is based on a substantial number of codices, is the following: Emanuela AMAND DE MENDIETA – Sigrid Y. RUDBERG (eds.), *Basilus von Caesarea, Homilien zum Hexaemeron* (Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, NF 2), Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1997. The text analysed by Rasmussen can be found in this edition on pages 96-101.

²⁵ A. RASMUSSEN, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen*, p. 479.

²⁶ A. RASMUSSEN, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen*, 479-481.

²⁷ A. RASMUSSEN, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen*, 481-482.

work this is the theme of the entire discourse, in Basil's presentation it is the climax of his rhetoric²⁸.

In the fifth instance when Basil treats of the same problem, he explicitly contradicts Origen, saying that believing that the stars are intelligent living beings is more than madness (μανίας ἐπέκεινα). In the Latin translation of *De principiis* 1,7,3 we read the following:

“Stellae uero cum tanto ordine ac tanta ratione moueantur, ut in nullo prorsus aliquando cursus earum uisus sit impeditus, quomodo non ultra omnem stoliditatem est tantum ordinem tantamque disciplinae ac rationis obseruantiam dicere ab inrationalibus exigi uel expleri?”²⁹

Unfortunately, this passage is not included in the *Philocalia*, so we cannot tell with certainty what was the expression translated by Rufinus as *ultra omnem stoliditatem*. However, Rasmussen makes the guess that it was μανίας ἐπέκεινα. He adds: “even if those were not the exact words, it is probable that Basil deliberately reverses and contradicts Origen's opinion”³⁰.

Rasmussen's observations seem to illustrate perfectly well that Basil did draw on Origen's texts extensively, taking over expressions sometimes freely, sometimes verbatim, and in the last case he even opposes Origen's view on the question if the planets are intelligent living beings or not.

As to Origen's direct or indirect influence on the Latin authors, in our context it is enough to mention the first Latin translation of Basil's homilies by Eustathius³¹ and the *Exameron* of Ambrose. Origen's and Basil's arguments against astrology found their way into the Latin works especially through these works. The bishop of Milan dwells at length on the exegesis of Gen 1,14-16³². He takes over from the previous

²⁸ A. RASMUSSEN, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen*, 482-483.

²⁹ Henri CROUZEL – Manlio SIMONETTI (eds), *Origène, Traité des Principes*, Tome I (Livres I et II), (SC 252), Paris, Cerf, 1978, pp. 212 and 214.

³⁰ A. RASMUSSEN, *Basil of Caesarea's Uses of Origen*, p. 483.

³¹ Emanuela AMAND DE MENDIETA – Sigrfrid Y. RUDBERG (eds), *Eustathius. Ancienne version latine des neuf homélies sur l'Hexaéméron de Basile de Césarée* (TU, 66), Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1958.

³² Christoph SCHENKEL (ed.), *Sancti Ambrosii opera, Pars prima qua continentur libri Exameron (...)*. (CSEL 32/1), Pragae - Vindobonae - Lipsiae, F. Tempsky & G. Freytag, 1896, 110-140. As to Origen's influence on Ambrose see H. SAVON, *Ambroise lecteur d'Origène*,

critics of astrologers also several of their arguments about the impracticability of their so-called scientific measurements. At first, he says he is ready to comply and allow some force to their argument. But then he describes the absurdities to which the statements of the Chaldeans lead as far as the infinite subdivisions of time is concerned. These extremely short periods of time are impossible to measure, although the Chaldeans allege that this would be necessary to tell who is destined to a long life and who is not. The notorious counterargument of Sextus Empiricus conjuring up the scene of the birth of a child appears also here:

“Let them reconstruct the following if they would. Suppose a woman is giving birth to a child. As a matter of course the midwife first observes the child. She looks for his cry as giving evidence of life and notes whether the child is a male or a female. How many moments will you allow for all these acts? Suppose that there is an astrologer near at hand. Can a man be present at a childbirth? While the midwife is giving information and while the Chaldean is listening and setting up the horoscope, the fates of the new-born child have already entered the space of the lot belonging to another person. It follows that while an investigation is being made regarding the fate of one person, the nativity of another is in the process of being established.”³³

Then Ambrose describes in detail how the Chaldeans divide the zodiacal circle, applying the Greek term (μοίραι) for the second phase of subdivision. Finally, he says that what the Chaldeans and their followers believe is utterly ridiculous:

“Wherefore, since it is impossible to take such tenuous moment of time into account and since the slightest variation introduces an enormous error, the whole affair is based on mere phantasy. Its advocates are ignorant of their own destiny. How, then, can they know that of other men? They do not know what is in store for themselves. Can they announce the future of others? It

in Luigi Federico PIZZOLATO – Matteo RIZZI (eds), *Nec timeo mori. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant’Ambrogio* (Studia Patristica Mediolanensia, 21), Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1998, 221-234 and Andrew H. PIERCE, *Reconsidering Ambrose’s Reception of Basil’s Homiliae in Hexaemeron: The Lasting Legacy of Origen*, in *ZAC* 23 (2019), no.3, 414-444.

³³ John J. SAVAGE (tr.), *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel* (The Fathers of the Church, 42), Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1961 (reprint: 1977), p. 137.

is ridiculous to believe this, because if they were able to do so, they would inevitably foresee what the future held for themselves”³⁴.

So, with Ambrose the arguments about the impracticability of the allegedly exact measurements of the constellations of the stars found their way into the exegetical tradition of the Latin world.

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³⁴ AMBROSE, *Hexameron*, 138. In Latin: „unde cum impossibile sit tam subtiles minutias temporis comprehendere, exigua autem inmutatio inuehat uniuersitatis errorem, totum negotium plenum est uanitatis. disputatores eorum quae sua sunt nesciunt: et quomodo aliena nouerunt? quid sibi imineat ignorant: possunt aliis quae futura sunt denuntiare? ridiculum est credere, quia, si possent, sibi potius prouiderent.” (Sancti Ambrosii opera, Pars prima, *Exameron*, p. 122).

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