



Deification of the Planets

The Sun and the Moon are two great luminaries, and it is easily understandable that the imagination of the peoples should be preoccupied with them and should ascribe to them mythological deeds. Yet the ancient mythologies of the Chaldeans, the Greeks, the Romans, the Hindus, the Mayans, preoccupy themselves not with the Sun or the Moon, but *prima facie* with the planets. Marduk, the great god of the Babylonians, was the planet Jupiter; so was Amon of the Egyptians, Zeus of the Greeks and Jupiter of the Romans.⁽¹⁾ It was much superior to Shamash-Helios, the Sun. Why was it revered by all peoples? Why was the planet Mars chosen to be the personification of the god of war? Why did Kronos of the Greeks, Saturn of the Romans, play a part in hundreds of myths and legends? Thoth of the Egyptians, Nebo and Nergal of the Babylonians, Mithra and Mazda of the Persians, Vishnu and Shiva of the Hindus, Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl of the Mexicans, were personifications of planets; innumerable hymns were dedicated to them and adventures and exploits ascribed to them.

“The life of our planet has its real source in the Sun,” wrote E. Renan. “All force is a transformation of the Sun. Before religion had gone so far as to proclaim that God must be placed in the absolute and the ideal, that is to say, outside of the world, one cult only was reasonable and scientific, and that was the cult of the Sun.”⁽²⁾ But the Sun was subordinate to the planets, even though they are not conspicuous, poor sources of light, and no sources of warmth.

The night sky illuminated by stars is majestic. The geometrical figures of the constellations, such as the Pleiades, Orion, or the Great Bear, rolling from the east in the evening to the west before morning, are favorite motifs in poetry, no less than the Sun and the Moon. But the discrepancy in the choice of motifs by the ancients becomes still more obvious. The constellations of the sky took only a minor and incidental part in the mythology of the ancient peoples. The *planets* were the major gods, and they rule the universe.⁽³⁾

“It is not easy to understand the idea which was the basis for the identification of the Babylonian gods with the planets,” writes an author;⁽⁴⁾ but the same process of identification of major gods with the planets can be found in the religions of the peoples in all parts of the world. The planets were not affiliated to the gods, or symbols of the gods—they *were* the gods. In prayers and liturgies they were invoked as gods. “The greater gods, even when addressed by name in prayer, were regarded as astral powers.”⁽⁵⁾ This or that planet is selected, according to the text of the prayer, from “the multitude of the stars of heaven” to receive a gift.

“The planetary gods are much the most powerful of all. Their positions in the sky, their reciprocal relations . . . have a decisive influence on all physical and moral phenomena of the world.”⁽⁶⁾

The great majority of us moderns pay no attention to these points in the night sky, and probably not one in ten or even in a hundred is able to point to Jupiter or Mars in the firmament. The planets change their places, but not conspicuously. Were they indebted for their deification to this slow movement, by which they differ from the fixed stars? Did Zeus-Jupiter-Marduk-Amon become the supreme deity, the thunderer and dreadful lord

of the universe, only because of his slow movement—he passes in twelve years the circle of the zodiac, traversed by the Sun in twenty-four hours, and by the Moon even quicker? When seen with the naked eye the planet Jupiter distinguishes itself from the fixed stars of first magnitude only by this slow change of position.

Augustine, confused by the problem of the deification of the planets, wrote in the fourth century:

But possibly these stars which have been called by their names are these gods. They call a certain star Mercury, and likewise a certain other star Mars. But among those stars which are called by the name of gods, is that one which they call Jupiter, and yet with them Jupiter is the world. There also is that one they call Saturn, and yet they give him no small property beside, namely all seeds.⁽⁷⁾

Mercury, the closest to the Sun, is barely visible, being hidden in the Sun's rays. But the ancients made the planet Mercury into a great god—Hermes or Nebo. Why was it feared and worshiped? What is there generally in the planets to inspire awe, so as to influence people to build temples for them, to sing liturgies, to bring sacrifices, to narrate legends, and to dedicate to them the domain of science, of war, of agriculture?

The ancients were sufficiently enlightened to know that the planets are large rocks like the Earth that circle on orbits.⁽⁸⁾ And this makes the modern scholars wonder: knowing that the planets are rocks, why did the ancients believe that they are gods?⁽⁹⁾

The key to this problem, which is the major problem of all classical mythology, is already in our hands. The planet Venus was deified because of its dramatic appearance and because of the havoc it brought to the world, as described in *Worlds in Collision*. I illuminated also the events which made Mars a feared god. Divine qualities were ascribed to the other planets because of the catastrophes they wrought in earlier ages.

In the Persian holy books it is said that “on the planets depends the existence or non-existence of the world—wherefore are they especially to be venerated.”⁽¹⁰⁾ “The seven planets rule the universe,” says a Nabatean inscription.⁽¹¹⁾ The Greeks and Romans believed that “everything is, in fact, subject to the changes brought about by the revolutions of the stars.”⁽¹²⁾

“The celestial orbs by their combined movements are the authors of all that was, and is, and is to come.” According to ancient Hebrew traditions, “there are seven archangels, each of whom is associated with a planet.”⁽¹³⁾ “The seven archangels were believed to play an important part in the universal order through their associations with the planets. . . .”⁽¹⁴⁾

The reason for the deification of the planets lay in the fact that the planets only a short time ago were not faultlessly circling celestial bodies, nor were they harmless. This is also expressed in a Mandaean text: “How cruel are the planets that stay there and conspire evil in their rage . . . the planets conspire in rage against us.”⁽¹⁵⁾

References

1. [These identifications are discussed below, Part IV: “Jupiter of the Thunderbolt.”]

2. *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques* (Paris, 1876), p. 168. [Cf. Macrobius]
3. [For ancient planetary worship among the **Babylonians**, see Bartel L. van der Waerden, *Science Awakening*, Vol. II (Leyden, 1974), p. 59; among the **Egyptians**, see H. Brugsch, *Astronomische und astrologische Inschriften altaegyptischer Denkmaeler* (Leipzig, 1883); E. Naville, "La Destruction des hommes par les dieux," *Transactions of the Society for Biblical Archaeology* IV (1875), pp. 1-18; O. Neugebauer and R. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts* (London, 1969); among the **Hebrews**, see M. Seligsohn, "Star Worship" in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1905); cf. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1925), vol. III, p. 371; vol. VI, pp. 66f.; among the **Persians**, see *The Dabistan*, transl. by D. Shea and A. Troyer (Washington, 1901); among the **Finns**, see J. M. Crawford's preface to *The Kalevala*, (Cincinnati, 1904), p. xiv.].
4. P. Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* (Strassburg, 1890), p. 134.
5. L. W. King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery*, (London, 1896), Section V.; cf. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 48.
6. F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, (1912), p. 120; cf. idem, "Le mysticisme astral," *Bull. Acad. de Belgique* (1909); also idem, "Les noms des planetes et l'astrologie chez les Grecs," *Antiquite Classique* IV (1935), pp. 6ff.
7. *The City of God*, transl. by M. Dods (1907), Book VII, ch. 15.
8. This was the teaching of Anaxagoras as reported by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Famous Philosophers*, II. 8.
9. E. Pfeiffer, *Gestirne und Wetter im griechischen Volksglauben* (Leipzig, 1914), pp. 24f. [The deification of the planets is advocated in the Platonic *Epinomis* 471; cf. also Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 21. 54-55.]
10. *Yasnav* I. 307. See J. Scheftelowitz, *Die Zeit als Schicksalgottheit in der indischen und iranischen Religion* (Stuttgart, 1929), p. 2.
11. D. Chwolson, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus* (St. Petersburg, 1856), vol. II, pp. 604f.
12. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, pp. 113-114; [cf. M. P. Nilsson, "The Origin of Belief among the Greeks in the Divinity of the Heavenly Bodies," *Harvard Tr. Rel.* 33 (1940), pp. 1ff. and idem, "Symbolisme astronomique et mystique dans certains cultes publics grecs," *Homages Bidez-Cumont* (1949), pp. 217ff. Cf. also P. Boyance, "La religion astrale de Platon a Ciceron," *Revue des Etudes Grecques* LXV (1952), pp. 312-350.]
13. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, 1939), p. 98.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
15. M. Lidzbarski, "Ein mandaeischer Amulett," *Florilegium*, pp. 350f.