



***MORRIS  
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ASSYRIAN  
BIRTH-OMENS  
AND THEIR  
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**Morris Jastrow**

# **Babylonian-Assyrian Birth-Omens and Their Cultural Significance**

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As a result of researches in the field of Babylonian-Assyrian divination, now extending over a number of years[1], it may be definitely said that apart from the large class of miscellaneous omens[2], the Babylonians and Assyrians developed chiefly three methods of divination into more or less elaborate systems—divination through the inspection of the liver of a sacrificial animal or Hepatoscopy, through the observation of the movements in the heavens or Astrology, (chiefly directed to the moon and the planets but also to the sun and the prominent stars and constellations), and through the observance of signs noted at birth in infants and the young of animals or Birth-omens. Elsewhere[3], I have suggested a general division of the various forms of divination methods into two classes, voluntary and involuntary divination, meaning by the former the case in which a sign is deliberately selected and then observed, by the latter where the sign is not of your own choice but forced upon your attention and calling for an interpretation. Hepatoscopy falls within the former category[4], Astrology and Birth-omens in the latter.

Each one of these three methods rests on an underlying well-defined theory and is not the outcome of mere caprice or pure fancy, though of course these two factors are also prominent. In the case of Hepatoscopy, we find the underlying theory to have been the identification of the 'soul' or vital centre of the sacrificial victim—always a sheep—with the deity to whom the animal is offered,—at least to

the extent that the two souls are attuned to one another. The liver being, according to the view prevalent among Babylonians and Assyrians as among other peoples of antiquity at a certain stage of culture, the seat of the soul[5], the inspection of the liver followed as the natural and obvious means of ascertaining the mind, i. e., the will and disposition of the deity to whom an inquiry has been put or whom one desired to consult. The signs on the liver—the size and shape of the lobes, and of the gall bladder, the character or peculiarities of the two appendices to the upper lobe, (the processus pyramidalis and the processus papillaris), and the various markings on the liver were noted, and on the basis of the two main principles conditioning all forms of divination (1) association of ideas and (2) noting the events that followed upon certain signs, a decision was reached as to whether the deity was favorably or unfavorably disposed or, what amounted to the same thing, whether the answer to the inquiry was favorable or unfavorable.

In the case of Astrology,—a relatively more advanced method of divination,—the underlying theory rested on the supposed complete correspondence between movements and phenomena in the heavens and occurrences on earth. The gods, being identified with the heavenly bodies,—with the moon, sun, planets, and fixed stars—or as we might also put it, the heavenly bodies being personified as gods, the movements in the heavens were interpreted as representing the activity of the gods preparing the events on earth. Therefore, he who could read the signs in the heavens aright would know what was to happen here below.

Astrology corresponded in a measure to the modern Weather Bureau in that it enabled one to ascertain a little in advance what was certain to happen, sufficiently so in order to be prepared for it. Compared with Hepatoscopy, Astrology not only represents a form of divination that might be designated as semi-scientific—only relatively scientific of course—but also occupies a higher plane, because there was no attempt involved to induce a deity unfavorably disposed to change his mind. The signs were there; they pointed unmistakably to certain occurrences on earth that were certain to occur and it was the task of the diviner—the *bârû* or ‘inspector’ as the Babylonian called him—to indicate whether what the gods were preparing would be beneficial or harmful. Both Hepatoscopy and Astrology as developed by the Babylonians and Assyrians *bârû*-priests exerted a wide influence, the former spreading to the Hittites and Etruscans and through the one or the other medium to Greeks and Romans[6], while Babylonian-Assyrian Astrology passing to the Greeks became the basis for Graeco-Roman and mediaeval Astrology, profoundly influencing the religious thought of Europe[7] and in a modified form surviving even to our own days. The chain of evidence has recently been completed[8] to prove the direct transfer of the cuneiform astrological literature to Greek astrologers and astronomers. The possibility also of a spread or at least of a secondary influence of both systems to the distant East is also to be considered. In fact considerable evidence is now available to show that Babylonian-Assyrian astrological notions and in part also astronomical data spread to China[9].

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The observation of signs observed in young animals and in infants at the time of birth constitutes a third division of Babylonian-Assyrian divination, quite equal in prominence to Hepatoscopy and Astrology. Here too we are justified in seeking for some rational or quasi-rational basis for the importance attached by Babylonians and Assyrians, and as we shall see by other nations as well, to anything of a noteworthy or unusual character observed at the moment that a new life was ushered into the world. The mystery of life made as deep an impression upon primitive man and upon ancient peoples as it does on the modern scientist, who endeavors with his better equipment and enriched by the large experience of past ages, to penetrate to the very source of life. A new life issuing from another life—what could be stranger, what more puzzling, what more awe-inspiring? If we bear in mind that there is sufficient evidence to warrant us in saying that among peoples in a primitive state of culture, the new life was not associated with the sexual act[10], the mystery must have appeared still more profound. The child or the young animal was supposed to be due to the action of some spirit or demon that had found its way into the mother, just as death was supposed to be due to some malicious demon that had driven the spirit of life out of the body. The many birth customs found in all parts of the world[11], are associated with this impression of mystery made by the new life; they centre largely round the idea of protection to the mother and her offspring at a critical period. The rejoicing is tempered by the fear of the



demons who were supposed to be lurking near to do mischief to the new life and to the one who brought it forth. The thought is a natural one, for the young life hangs in the balance, while that of the mother appears to be positively threatened. All bodily suffering and all physical ailments being ascribed to the influence of bad demons, or to the equally malevolent influence of persons who could by their control of the demons or in some other way throw a spell over the individual, Birth, Puberty, Marriage and Death as the four periods in life which may be regarded as critical and transitional are marked by popular customs and religious rites that follow mankind from primitive times down to our own days. A modern scholar, Van Gennep, who has recently gathered these customs in a volume and interpreted them, calls his work 'Rites de Passage', i. e., customs associated with the four periods of transition from one stage to the other and which survive in advanced forms of faith as Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage ceremonies and Funeral rites, just as the chief festivals in all religions are the 'Rites de Passage' of nature—associated with the transition periods of the year, with the vernal equinox, the summer solstice, the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice or, expressed in agricultural terms, with sowing time, with blossoming or early harvest time, with the later harvest time and with the period of decay.

The significance attached to birth omens is thus merely a phase of the ceremonies attendant upon the passage of the new-born from its mysterious hiding place to the light. The analogy between the new life and the processes of nature is complete, for the plant, too, after being hidden in the earth,

which is pictured in the religions of antiquity as a ‘great mother’, comes to the surface.



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The field of observation in the case of the new-born among mankind and in the animal world is large—very large, and yet definitely bounded. Normal conditions were naturally without special significance, but any deviation from the normal was regarded as a sign calling for interpretation. Such deviations covered a wide and almost boundless range from peculiar formations of any part of the body or of the features, to actual malformations and monstrosities. The general underlying principle was, the greater the abnormality, the greater the significance attached to it; and as in the case of the movements in the heaven, the unusual was regarded as an indication of some imminent unusual occurrence. We are fortunate in possessing among the tablets of Ashurbanapal’s library, unearthed by Layard just fifty years ago and which is still our main source for the Babylonian-Assyrian religious literature, many hundreds of texts furnishing lists of birth omens and their interpretation[\[12\]](#), just as we have many hundreds of texts dealing with liver divination[\[13\]](#), and even more dealing with Astrology[\[14\]](#), apart from the many hundreds of texts dealing with miscellaneous omens of which up to the present only a small proportion has been published[\[15\]](#). From this division of the great collection gathered by Ashurbanapal’s scribes chiefly from the temple

archives of Babylonia, it appears that the bârû-priests made extensive collections of all kinds of omens which served the purpose of official hand-books to be consulted in case of questions put to the priests as to the significance of any particular phenomenon, and which were also used as textbooks for the training of the aspirants to the priesthood.

Confining ourselves to the birth-omens[16], the first question that arises is whether the signs entered are based on actual occurrences or are fanciful. In the case of many entries, as will presently be made evident, the anomalies noted rest upon actual observation, but with the desire of the priests to embrace in their collections all possible contingencies so as to be prepared for any question that might at any time arise, a large number of signs were entered which the diviners thought *might* occur. In other words, in order to be on the safe side the diviners allowed their fancy free rein and registered many things that we can positively say never did occur and never could occur[17]. With the help of hand-books on human and animal pathology, we can without difficulty distinguish between two classes. Thus, twins being regarded as significant and triplets even more so, the priests did not stop at this point but provided for cases when four, five six up to eight and more infants were born at one time[18]. Again in regard to animals, inasmuch as bitches and sows may throw a litter of ten and even more, the priests in their collections carried the number up to thirty[19] which is, of course, out of the question. For sheep and goats the number was extended up to ten, though it probably never happened that more than triplets were ever born to an ewe or to a mother-goat. Even

twins are rare, and I am told that there are few authenticated cases of triplets.

Malformations among infants and the young of animals were of course plentiful, but here too the anomalies and monstrosities are not as numerous and varied as were entered in the handbooks of the Babylonian and Assyrian diviners. The factor of fancy to which I have referred enters even more largely in the entries of many actual malformations, through the assumption of a more or less fanciful resemblance of some feature or of some part of an infant or of the young of an animal with the features or parts of some animal.

An excess number of limbs—three legs or four arms in the case of an infant, or five or six legs in the case of a lamb, puppy, pig or foal, or two heads—is not uncommon. On this basis the priests entered cases of excess legs and arms and heads up to nine and more[20]; and similarly in regard to ears and eyes.

That, however, despite the largely fanciful character of the entries in the omen texts, these collections not only rested on a firm basis of actual observation, but served a practical purpose is shown by the examples that we have of official reports made by the bârû-priests of human and animal anomalies, with the interpretations attached that represent quotations from the collections[21]. A report of this kind in reference to an animal monstrosity reads in part as follows[22]:

‘If it is a double foetus, but with one head, a double spine, two tails and one body, the land that is now ruled by two will be ruled by one person.

If it is a double foetus with one head, the land will be safe.'

We have here two quotations from a text furnishing all kinds of peculiarities connected with a double foetus and we are fortunate in having the text from which the quotations are made[23]. Evidently an ewe has given birth to a monstrosity such as is here described, the case has been reported to the diviners who furnish the king[24] with this report, indicating that since the monstrosity has only one head, what might have been an unfavorable omen is converted into a favorable one.

Another report[25] regarding a monstrosity born of a sow reads:

'If a foetus has eight feet and two tails, the ruler will acquire universal sway. A butcher, Uddanu by name, reported as follows: A sow gave birth (to a young) having eight feet and two tails. I have preserved it in salt and kept it in the house. From Nergal-eṭir[26].'

Here we have the name of the bârû-priest who made the report expressly indicated. The report begins with a quotation from the collections, indicating the interpretation to be put upon the occurrence, after which the report of the actual event that took place is given in detail; and Nergal-eṭir is careful to add that he has preserved the specimen as a proof of its occurrence, precisely as to-day such a monstrosity would be bottled and kept in a pathological museum. In another report[27] containing various



quotations from the collections of birth-omens and closing with one in regard to a mare that had given birth to two colts, one male and one female, with smooth hair over the ears, over the feet, mouth and hoofs, which is interpreted as a favorable sign[\[28\]](#), the one who makes the report adds 'Whether this is so, I shall ascertain. It will be investigated according to instructions'. Evidently, the facts had not been definitely ascertained and the diviner, while furnishing the interpretations for various possibilities, promises to inform himself definitely and report again as to the exact nature of the unusual occurrence. Frequently these omen reports contain interesting and important allusions to historical events which are then embodied in the collections[\[29\]](#). In fact the event which followed upon any unusual or striking sign, whether in the heavens or among the newly born or what not, was carefully noted and on the principle of post hoc propter hoc was regarded as the event presaged by the sign in question. The definite indication of the interpretation to be put upon the omen itself was supplied by the actual event that followed upon the appearance of some sign, though it was not supposed that the sign would always be followed by the same occurrence. The point to which attention was primarily directed was whether the occurrence was of a favorable or an unfavorable nature. If favorable, the conclusion was drawn that the sign was a favorable one and hence in the event of its recurrence some favorable incident might be expected according to existing circumstances—victory in an impending battle, suppression of an uprising, recovery of some member of the royal household who may be lying ill, good crops at the