

The Peratae – Gnostic Astrologers

Robert Tulip

27 April 2012

The Peratae were a Gnostic group whose teachings are described in the *Refutation of all Heresies* (Volume V) by the third century theologian Hippolytus of Rome. Hippolytus provides a useful source to help reconstruct Gnostic views. His extant work is available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050105.htm> Information on him is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolytus_of_Rome

Hippolytus says of the tenets of the Peratae that “their system is not framed by them out of the [holy Scriptures](#), but from astrological *art*.” He imagines this provides a decisive refutation, based on the universal acceptance of Christian dogma, but analysis of his argument indicates that he failed to understand the Peratae, who provide a valuable insight into the coherent basis of Gnostic thought.

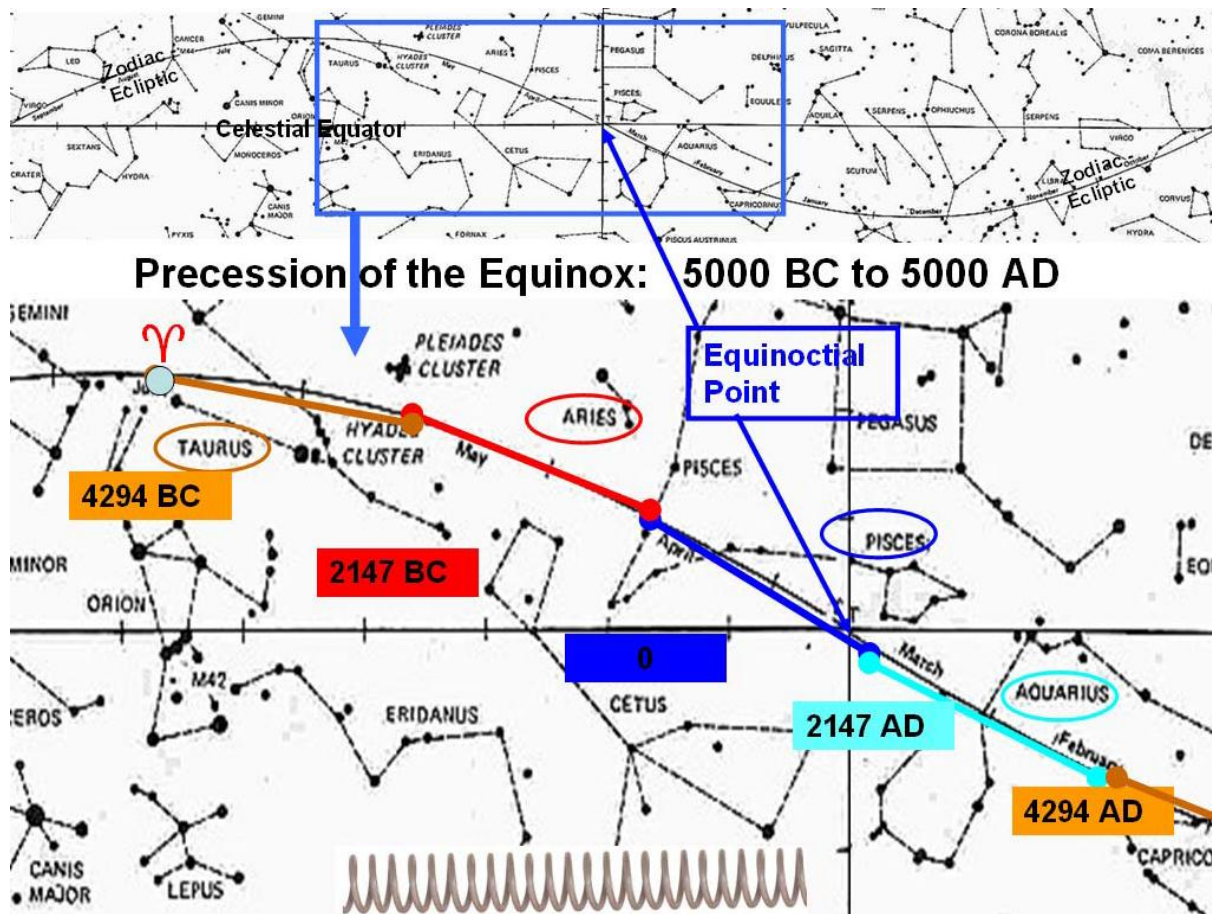
My approach to the reconstruction of the evolution of Christian theology begins with the hypothesis that Christianity was originally a secret doctrine in which astrology was central, seeing Christ as the point of celestial harmony where heaven and earth became one. If this hypothesis is correct, the orthodox contrast between scripture and astrology is a degraded vision, in which an original high cosmic understanding had been forgotten, and become the object of suppression as Gnostic heresy.

By this hypothesis, ancient seers observed the slow cycle of the heavens, and perceived the time of Christ as the moment when the cycle of the earth, seen in the timing of the seasons, and the cycle of the heavens, seen in the movement of the sun against the zodiac, were in tune with each other. For readers whose instinct is to dismiss this as baseless speculation, I must emphasise that this cosmology is a purely scientific argument based on the astronomy of precession of the equinox, widely known since at least the time of Hipparchus in the second century BC.

Before Christ, the sun had already left the constellation of Pisces and entered Aries at the spring equinox on 21 March. After Christ, the sun was still in the constellation of Pisces at the equinox. Only at the time of Christ, in the decades around the exact transition point of 21 AD, did the sun physically move from Pisces to Aries precisely at the equinox, establishing a base point to see the stars and the seasons in a cosmic harmony. At this time, and at no other historical time before or since, all twelve signs of the tropical zodiac occurred exactly when the sun was in their corresponding stars. The seasons matching the stars embodied the ‘as above so below’ symbolism that was central to ancient religion.

I understand that readers unfamiliar with this material regard it as magical speculation, but I assure you that this information is purely scientific and can readily be confirmed. What it means, when considered against theology, is that Christ represents a cosmic ‘alpha and omega’ point, the beginning of a New Age and the conclusion of an Old Age.

This diagram shows the ages of the zodiac over historical time, as an empirical model of time that requires no unscientific speculation to understand, even for ancient knowledge.



Reading Hippolytus is helpful to develop this framework, and the cultural clash it provoked as Christianity became a mass movement. While his agenda was to mock the blasphemers and promote orthodoxy, he nevertheless provides ideas which are well worth considering in the effort to understand Gnostic thought. There is much that is inscrutable and implausible in Gnostic texts, and like other Gnostic work, some Peratae ideas show a strong element of speculative mythology which makes little apparent sense. Despite that, it is worth persevering to find Gnostic teachings that match up to the astronomical framework for Christ that I have described above. While Hippolytus provides an undoubtedly distorted and incorrect summary of their teachings, he gives enough fragments to indicate a view that corresponds to the cosmic framework of precession.

Hippolytus says the Peratae taught “there came down from above... in the time of [Herod](#) a certain man called Christ ... It pleased him that in him should dwell all fullness bodily, and in Him the entire Divinity resides”

Readers familiar with Paul’s letter to the Philippians will see here a similarity to the famous cosmic hymn of the descent of Christ. My view is that this cosmic hymn is a corrupted distortion of an original teaching about Christ, which understood the Logos as the harmony between the earth and the heavens as I explained above. It seems this cosmic framework was hard to teach and understand, and so was turned into a parable about an actual man, a parable

that steadily took on historical trappings as Christianity evolved from Paul's cosmic vision to the fable of the Gospels.

Hippolytus titles his Chapter 8 "The Peratae Derive Their System from the Astrologers; This Proved by a Statement of the Astrological Theories of the Zodiac; Hence the Terminology of the Peratic Heretics." We see here that derivation from astrology is considered wrong in and of itself, and sufficient to damn the Peratae as worthless heretics. The orthodox thought processes start from a moral and intellectual rejection of pagan culture. The observation that astrology is central to pagan culture, and the strong Jewish rejection of star worship, therefore lead the orthodox to a rejection of any modes of thought that draw on astrological sources.

The deep irony here is that if Christianity itself was based on an accurate astrological observation, then attitudes such as those of Hippolytus were designed to deny and conceal the very origin of their own faith. I must emphasise again that the alpha-omega star motif for Christ is purely empirical. While of course it is easy to embroider it with magical speculation, no such speculation is required to see it as the heavenly framework for the symbolism. Precession was well known to the Mediterranean world of scholarship since well before Christ. Watching this slow process matched well to the Bible prophecies of a coming anointed one, with the moment of anointing understood as the time when the seasons and the stars would be in tune with each other.

Summarising the Peratae cosmology, Hippolytus tells us that "the astrologers, alleging that there is one world, divide it into the twelve fixed portions of the zodiacal signs, and call the world of the fixed zodiacal signs one immoveable world; and the other they affirm to be ... erratic ... (they lay down), that (one) world derives from (the other) world a certain power, and mutual participation (in that power), and that the [lower] obtain this participation from the [upper]."

Here we see the Gnostic idea 'as above so below', reflected in the Biblical Lord's Prayer 'as in heaven so on earth'. The idea is that erratic events on earth are governed by the regular movement of the stars. Modern science has found no evidence for such causal process, so if it is real then it is very weak. However, direct causality is not necessary for this astrological framework to provide the basis for the ancient cosmology. The upper world of the regular movement of the heavens can be considered like the hands of a clock, which mark events without causing them. A clock reaching 5pm does not cause people to leave work, but it provides a convenient regular measure of a decision that is caused by other factors.

Hippolytus mocks the idea of stellar causation: "as they wistfully gazed upward upon heaven, the Chaldeans asserted that (the seven stars) [sun, moon and five visible planets] contain a reason for the efficient causes of the occurrence of all the events that happen unto us."

Indeed, astrology does claim the stars are an 'efficient cause', a claim that is the basis for the low repute of astrology today, in view of the failure to find any statistical evidence for it. And yet, this 'efficient cause' argument should really be set aside. The question here is how the Christ myth emerged, and as noted above, there is no need to postulate a real causality involving such action at a distance within the speculative framework of early cosmology.

Describing further the astrological heresy, Hippolytus gives a tantalising glimpse of his lost Book IV, in which he says he explains this material in greater detail. “In Aries is the vernal turning, and in Capricorn that of winter, and in Cancer that of summer, and in Libra that of autumn. The details, however, concerning this system we have minutely explained in the book preceding this.”

A hot clue towards the precessional framework of Gnosticism now appears: “Now these, falsifying the name of [truth](#), proclaim as a doctrine of Christ an insurrection of Aeons and revolts of good into (the ranks of) [evil](#) powers.”



The term Aeon, or Age, is complex. Greco-Roman mysteries worshiped a God named Aion, also identified with Saturn, Kronos, and Time. A statue of Aion shows a man with a lion's head and eagle's wings, standing on top of a globe, with a snake coiling six times around the body from the man's feet to the its head at the lion's forehead. This image of Aion matches precisely to precession of the equinox, the vision of 12,000 years from when the spring equinox was in Leo the Lion to its current position at the start of Aquarius the Man. The six coils represent the six Ages of the Zodiac, Leo, Cancer, Gemini, Taurus, Aries and Pisces, leading to the beginning of the New Age of Aquarius. Again, I note that this description is purely empirical astronomy, and needs no astrological magic to be understood as a perfectly accurate terrestrial cosmology that was understood as such in the ancient world.

But Hippolytus sees any discussion of Aeons as insufferably infused with magical error, and therefore mocks this Gnostic theory of the 'doctrine of Christ'. However, it is readily possible to see the cosmic framework of fall and redemption against the markers of the Aeons. The idea, glimpsed in the Vedas, Daniel and Hesiod, is that the Age of Leo (the dawn of the Holocene) was the Golden Age when humanity was in tune with God, followed by successively worse ages of silver and bronze leading to the current low point of the age of iron, marked by ignorance of God. In this framework, the low point of the cycle is reached during the 7000 years beginning with the Age of Taurus in about 4000 BC, while return towards a better world begins at the time of Christ, with the dawn of the Age of Pisces, leading to the millennium of peace and restoration from 2000 AD. The Age of Pisces is only the beginning of a very slow 24,000 year cycle, and is seen as preparation for the next age, the Age of Aquarius, beginning about 2000 AD, when the redemptive teaching of Christ will finally begin to be understood.

As a scientific aside, this framework of Aeons actually matches to real climate cycles. The Holocene dawned when the northern summer was at perihelion, the orbital point closest to the sun, and the opposite point, when the northern summer was furthest from the sun, was in 1296 AD. This cycle, driven primarily by precession of the equinox as the observable indicator of earth's axial wobble, is the basis of earth's glacial rhythms, observable in ice core records over the last million years.

The Peratae, in Hippolytus' account, say “I am a voice of arousal from slumber in the age of night. Henceforward I commence to strip the power which is from chaos.” This vision matches precisely to the precessional framework of the Age of Pisces as the bottom of the

cycle, the midnight of the Great Year considered as a day of God. After ages of growing war and alienation, the promise is a return from chaos to cosmos.

After some obscure mythological commentary, Hippolytus gets to the Peratae doctrine of the serpent. The reader will recall that in the mysteries the serpent coils around the man-lion, indicating the actual cycles of time seen in precession. Here we are beginning to unveil the riddle of the Sphinx.

Hippolytus tells us the Gnostics saw the serpent in the stars: they say “the stars are the gods of destruction ... These ... [Moses](#) denominated serpents of the wilderness... To children of [Israel](#) [who] were bitten in the wilderness, [Moses](#) exhibited the real and perfect serpent; and they who [believed](#) on this serpent were not bitten in the wilderness, that is, (were not assailed) by ([evil](#)) powers. No one therefore, he says, is there who is able to save and deliver those that come forth from [Egypt](#), that is, from the body and from this world, unless alone the serpent that is perfect and replete with fullness. Upon this (serpent), he says, he who fixes his hope is not destroyed by the snakes of the wilderness, that is, by the gods of generation. (This statement) is written, he says, in a book of [Moses](#). This serpent, he says, is the power that attended [Moses](#), the rod that was turned into a serpent. The serpents, however, of the magicians— (that is,) the gods of destruction— withstood the power of [Moses](#) in [Egypt](#), but the rod of [Moses](#) reduced them all to subjection and slew them. This universal serpent is, he says, the wise discourse of Eve.”



The staff of Moses, used also in current medical symbolism, is clearly part of the same esoteric mystery tradition that is observable in the statue of Aion, with the four points of the cross marking the four corners of the zodiac, Taurus, Leo, Scorpio and Aquarius, which gave rise to the symbols of the Four Evangelists as Luke the ox, John the Eagle, Mark the Lion, and Matthew the Man. The displacement of the scorpion or snake by the eagle is another interesting topic, seen in the change of the symbol of the Israelite tribe of Dan.

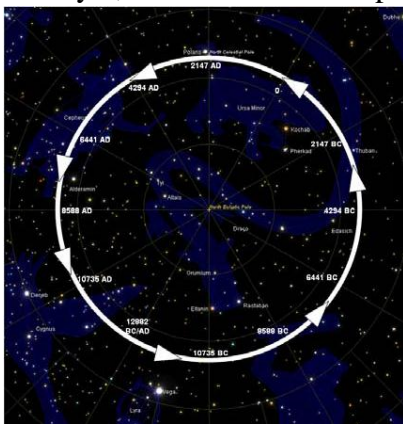
Returning to Hippolytus’ summary, we see that this universal snake symbol, “the real and perfect serpent”, is described as “the wise discourse of Eve”. The idea of feminine wisdom was damnable enough for the patriarchs, indicating why such Gnostic teachings had to be suppressed by the church. If the origin of this coiling snake symbol is in an accurate vision of the movement of the heavens, we can begin to understand how the Gnostic teachings originated in a coherent cosmology, but one that is invisible, due to its slow motion, except to cosmic seers who observed the skies over millennia, such as those whom Hippolytus derides as Chaldeans.

Hippolytus says the Gnostics taught that the snake “appeared in the last days, in form of a man, in the times of Herod”. Again, we see Christ as symbol of Aion, and of the slow cycle of precession symbolised by the coils of the snake, a teaching guaranteed to inflame Christian opinion grounded in the Genesis story of the snake as embodiment of evil.

The Gnostics teach that “In the same manner as [Moses](#) lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also must the [Son of man](#) be lifted up. According to the likeness of this was made in the [desert](#) the brazen serpent which [Moses](#) set up. Of this alone, he says, the image is in heaven, always conspicuous in light.” Here, in a well known Gospel text, we find the Gnostics explaining Christ as having an “image in heaven” of a snake. For the Gnostics, heaven was visible in the stars, “conspicuous in light”. Indeed, this matches to the tale of Christ in Mark 8 in the miracle of the loaves and fishes where he lifts his eyes to heaven and bemoans the inability of the disciples to understand what he is saying. Christ on the cross is a symbol of actual cosmic observation, seen in the snake of Moses and the statue of Aion.

And now we reach a key text, identifying the serpent with the stars of the north pole, formerly occupied by the constellation Draco the Dragon. “the ... blessed, ... looking upward on the firmament, will behold at the mighty summit of heaven the beauteous image of the serpent, turning itself, and becoming an originating principle of every (species of) motion to all things that are being produced. ... without him nothing consists, either of things in heaven, or things on earth. or things under the earth. Not night, not moon, not fruits, not generation, not [wealth](#), not sustenance, not anything at all of existent things, is without his guidance. In regard of this, he says, is the great wonder which is beheld in the firmament by those who are able to observe it. For, he says, at this top of his head, a fact which is more incredible than all things to those who are [ignorant](#), are setting and rising mingled one with other. This it is in regard of which [ignorance](#) is in the [habit](#) of affirming: in heaven Draco revolves, marvel mighty of monster dread.”

In northern temperate zones Draco never sets, a symbol of heavenly constancy and stability. And yet, over the slow sweep of precession, as shown here, the north pole has moved from its



former position in Draco to its current position (Polaris) in the little bear, adjacent to Leo the Lion. Around the circle of precession, one third of the polar sky is occupied by the dragon’s tail, providing a clear and decisive indication that Gnostic understanding of precession was entirely formative for the Christian vision of Revelation 12:4 and 13:2, where it explains, not only that the dragon sweeps one third of the sky with his tail, but that he gave his ‘power and seat and authority’ to the bear-lion-leopard, symbolising the movement of the pole from the dragon to the bear.

Hippolytus assumes that his simple dogmatic mockery is sufficient to demolish Gnostic thought. However, as the above analysis demonstrates, the Gnostics had a deep vision of reality that informed Christian mythology. The suppression of natural observation by Christian dogma led to a complete inability to engage in dialogue on these complex topics. I hope that the turning of the stars is leading us to a time when this material will be understood.