

# CULTURE AND COSMOS

*A Journal of the History of Astrology and Cultural Astronomy*

Vol. 3 no 1, Spring/Summer 1999

Published by Culture and Cosmos  
and the Sophia Centre Press,  
in partnership with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David,  
in association with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology  
in Culture,  
University of Wales Trinity Saint David,  
Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts  
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, SA48 7ED, UK.

[www.cultureandcosmos.org](http://www.cultureandcosmos.org)

Cite this paper as: Molnar, Michael R., 'Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 3 no 1, Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 3-9.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue card for this book is available from the British Library

*All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publishers.*

<b>ISSN 1368-6534</b>
-----------------------

Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source

Copyright © 2018 Culture and Cosmos  
All rights reserved

## Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem

---

**Michael R. Molnar**

**Abstract.** The *Mathesis* of Julius Firmicus Maternus describes astrological aspects responsible for bestowing divinity and immortality. These conditions have been identified as the major astrological components of the Star of Bethlehem.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, closer examination reveals that Firmicus juxtaposed pagan and Christian themes, which suggests he was a pagan making the transition to Christianity.

In ca. AD 334 Julius Firmicus Maternus wrote his *Mathesis*, a Latin compilation of Greek (Hellenistic) astrological sources. His book comes to us from an important period in Roman history when Christianity was supplanting Hellenistic philosophy and religion. At Milvian Bridge in AD 312 Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity and was christened in AD 337 before he died. The transition of Roman beliefs is reflected by Firmicus' subsequent book, *On the Error of Profane Religion*, (ca. AD 346) in which he criticised the Hellenistic mystery religions from a Christian perspective. That Firmicus first produced a 'pagan' book about Hellenistic astrology followed by one supportive of Christianity has led some researchers to construe that Firmicus converted to Christianity between writing these books. Jim Tester, however, suggested that Firmicus may have been a Christian while compiling the astrological work.<sup>2</sup> That is, Firmicus was reaffirming his Christian faith in view of the reception the *Mathesis* received from pious Christians. An examination of the *Mathesis* shows that Firmicus made a reference to the astrological conditions that have been attributed to the Star of Bethlehem. While this finding can be evidence for Firmicus' Christian faith, closer examination reveals that this more likely represents the amalgam of Christian and pagan beliefs.

The *Mathesis* is a treatise on Hellenistic astrology, which some researchers categorise as a 'pagan' book. As a result, they conclude that Firmicus was a pagan during its writing.<sup>3</sup> But further inspection suggests that he cannot be categorised as a staunch pagan. As Bram notes in the introduction of her translation, Firmicus writes in the customary style of an educated man who flaunts his erudition.<sup>4</sup> He discusses star-lore, legendary wisdom of the east, Hellenistic science and mythology, Neo-

#### 4 Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem

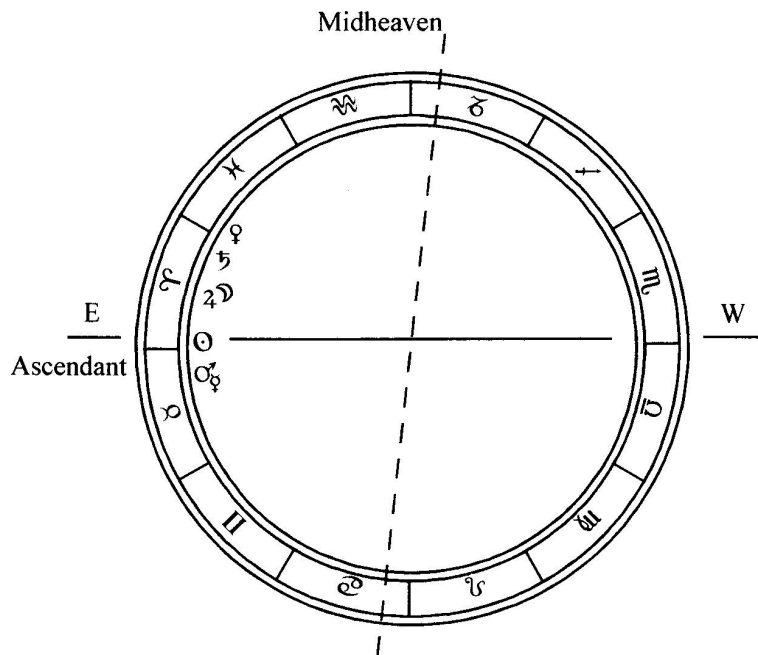
Platonism, and Stoicism. But Bram explains that the *Mathesis* is a product of Roman beliefs in a state of flux: there are sections that could have been written by a Christian prelate or by a Neo-Platonist philosopher. The ascetic, high moral tone would be acceptable to pagans and Christians of the fourth century. And references to the pagan planetary deities are somewhat muted as artistic or literary devices, which would make astrology acceptable to Christians. Although the book's affirmation of the divinity of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, seems to be proof of a pagan author, we recall that even the 'Christian' Emperor Constantine did not eliminate Sol Invictus from Roman coinage immediately upon his embracing of Christianity at Milvian Bridge.<sup>5</sup>

While pagan allusions in the *Mathesis* are blatant, cogent evidence of Christian beliefs is elusive. For instance, Bram notes references to a person called 'Abram.' She suggests that rather than referring to an obscure astrologer as some researchers advocate, Firmicus' placement of Abram in a list of august persons is more suitable for the Jewish patriarch Abraham.<sup>6</sup> A reference to the patriarch is plausible because Christian and pagan beliefs were intertwined during that time. Nevertheless, whether Abram is indeed the biblical Abraham remains an open question. But further scrutiny of the *Mathesis* reveals a heretofore unnoticed allusion, which makes a stronger case for Christian beliefs. In an intriguing passage, Firmicus writes about astrological conditions responsible for the births of divine and immortal persons. Of course, we could expect that if Firmicus were a Christian, he would relate this to Jesus Christ. As it turns out, a group of these aspects has been identified as the Star of Bethlehem.

The Messianic celestial omen commonly known as the Star of Bethlehem was a Hellenistic astrological portent, which received widespread attention as people aware of the prophecy of the Messiah looked to the skies for indications of his advent. This portent was eventually incorporated into the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The evidence is that the astrological conditions surrounding the planet Jupiter on April 17, 6 BC are the basis for the biblical story about the Magi's star.<sup>7</sup> On that day the skies portended the birth of great king in the lands ruled by Aries the Ram. According to Claudius Ptolemy and other sources, astrologers looked to Aries for indications of happenings in Judea.<sup>8</sup> Examining the astrological aspects of that day, we see conditions pointing unambiguously to an incredible birth in King Herod's realm. Those astrological elements centred around

the regal planet Jupiter, which underwent its transition to morning phase eight degrees from the Sun to be ‘in the east’. A horoscope cast according to the conventions of Hellenistic astrology shows that Jupiter emerged in the east while in conjunction with the Sun and Saturn in Aries. Thus, all of the triplicity rulers of Aries were present, which was a formidable regal portent. Furthermore, the Sun was in the sign of its exaltation. Filling out the magnificent conjunction, the Moon was in very close proximity to the regal planet Jupiter (which actually underwent a lunar occultation.) The regal conditions for planetary attendance were also fulfilled. All of these aspects synergistically produce a powerful horoscope, which reduces the need to know the time of the birth. That is, a horoscope cast for almost any hour is auspicious. Figure 1 illustrates a horoscope for sunrise, which shows the central importance of Aries the Ram.

**Figure 1: The Planets at Sunrise, 17 April 6 BC.**



## 6 Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem

From the vast extent of astrological aspects in the *Mathesis*, we could imagine that Firmicus had a wealth of sources, which may have included references to the Messianic Portent that Christians related to the birth of Jesus Christ. Firmicus, however, does not name Jesus. In fact, he rarely ascribes aspects to specific individuals. His analysis is that of a scientist drawing generalised conclusions deduced from specific horoscopes. Nevertheless, some important horoscopes can be recognised for special conditions, and a knowledgeable reader could find in Firmicus' analysis validation of cosmic influences over a birth. And such is the case for the following passage, which describes the birth of divine and immortal persons:

If Jupiter comes into aspect with the waxing Moon, this will create men of almost divine and immortal nature. This happens when the Moon is moving toward Jupiter. It is difficult to observe this. If Jupiter is in the north and the waxing and full Moon comes into aspect moving from the east (with Jupiter in his own house or exaltation or in signs in which he rejoices), the result is unconquerable generals who govern the whole world. This is especially true if the Sun in his exaltation is in trine aspect to Jupiter. For Jupiter rejoices by day when aspected by the Sun or Saturn, especially if he is in a morning rising.<sup>9</sup>

The above passage could describe a number of horoscopes, but there are two distinct conditions attributable to divine births. The first case includes those in which Jupiter is in the north, which is in Cancer where Jupiter is exalted. That location precludes Jupiter being in trine aspect with the exalted Sun in Aries - the other case for divinity. That is, Aries is part of the trine, or triplicity, including Leo and Sagittarius, which excludes Cancer. The case for the exalted Sun in Aries includes being aspected by the other triplicity rulers, Jupiter and Saturn. Thus, there are two horoscope groups: one centering around the exaltation of Jupiter and the other for the Sun's exaltation. (Nevertheless, a third horoscope with both exaltations can be truly portentous, even without Jupiter being in trine aspect to the Sun.)

The best known deified person among Romans was Augustus Caesar who published his horoscope, though it is now lost. Reconstructing that auspicious horoscope, we realise that Jupiter was exalted in Cancer, and a waxing Moon, a few days before full phase, was in Capricorn in

opposition to Jupiter.<sup>10</sup> The Moon in Capricorn fulfils the important condition for a luminary ruling its triplicity in its sect (night). Thus, a person looking for affirmation of Augustus' divine fate can recognize key elements from Augustus' natal horoscope: exalted Jupiter and a waxing Moon aspecting Jupiter.

That the birth of Augustus comes to mind in this passage is underscored by the reference to 'unconquerable generals who govern the whole world.' The appellation is very attributable to *Divuus Augustus* whose military successes forged the Roman Empire. Of course, the title of unconquerable world ruler went beyond luck on the battlefield: it had strong religious connotations about supernatural powers held by deities such as Sol Invictus and Mithras. A 'world ruler' controlled all events in the cosmos and the kosmokrator had divine powers.<sup>11</sup>

The other set of divine conditions centres around the Sun's exaltation, and describes the primary aspects of April 17, 6 BC, which have been proposed as the Star of Bethlehem.<sup>12</sup> They include the Sun exalted in Aries, which is the zodiacal sign ruling Judea. Furthermore, all three triplicity rulers (Sun, Jupiter, Saturn) were in Aries. Moreover, Jupiter was precisely 'in the east' and being occulted by the Moon. Close lunar conjunctions and occultations with Jupiter by themselves were important regal aspects, but could not be accurately predicted. These elusive events ('difficult to observe' as Firmicus notes in the above passage) could only be verified visually or assumed to have occurred. In any case, the second horoscope for divinity refers to the primary aspects comprising the Star of Bethlehem.

That Firmicus related the Star of Bethlehem aspects to 'men of almost divine and immortal nature' supports the identification of April 17, 6 BC as belonging to the Star of Bethlehem. But it also suggests an awareness of Christian beliefs by Firmicus. His reference to these aspects can be interpreted as his acknowledgement of the divinity of Jesus because he often knew the 'native', that is, the owner of the horoscope. Furthermore, his juxtaposition of aspects associated with Jesus along with those attributable to Augustus Caesar fits the transitional beliefs of that time. A pagan adopting Christianity could initially believe in both divinities until the Christian beliefs displaced the pagan ideas. Nevertheless, if Firmicus was trying to use the reference to the Star of Bethlehem to bridge both faiths, he failed in the eyes of pious Christians.

The abstruse, arcane concepts of the *Mathesis* would have been associated with Jesus only by people well versed in astrology. Pagans

## 8 Firmicus Maternus and the Star of Bethlehem

were extremely knowledgeable about astrology, which would have been used to validate their beliefs. But Christians abandoned Hellenistic astrology (for the most part), and would not have recognised any connection to Jesus' birth. Moreover, as is the case nowadays, they probably rejected any connection with 'pagan' astrology. That rejection drove the origins of the Star of Bethlehem into obscurity. And the refusal in modern times to examine astrological primary sources has produced only a plethora of unfounded speculations about the Messianic Portent.

Not only was Firmicus' allusion to the Star of Bethlehem indiscernible to Christians, but his *Mathesis* also appeared too pagan from their perspective. As we saw, the *Mathesis* adheres strongly to old pagan traditions. Even the reference to the divine and immortal conditions has a part attributable to the birth of Augustus Caesar, which is hardly evidence for an unmitigated Christian.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Tester's suggestion that Firmicus was a Christian while writing the *Mathesis* is valid to the extent that Firmicus was a Christian pagan, that is, a pagan sensitive to, or even in transition to Christianity. In any case, Firmicus' religious beliefs were of little consequence to the reception that the *Mathesis* would have received from devout Christians. His attack on the Hellenistic mystery religions in his subsequent book was not only to express his support of Christianity, but more importantly to vindicate (or even safeguard) himself from zealous Christians who disapproved of his 'pagan' *Mathesis*.

### References

1. Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*, (Piscataway, NJ, 1999) [hereafter Molnar, Star]. See also Michael R. Molnar, 'The Coins of Antioch', *Sky and Telescope*, (1992), Vol. 83, no. 1, p. 37-39; Michael R. Molnar, 'The Magi's Star from the Perspective of Ancient Astrological Practices', *Quarterly Journal Royal Astronomical Society*, (1992), Vol. 36, p. 109-126.
2. Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, (New York, 1987), p. 133, n.62.
3. *ibid.* p. 133-134.
4. *Ancient Astrology Theory and Practice: Matheseos Libri VIII* by Firmicus Maternus. Trans. Jean Rhys Bram, (Park Ridge, NJ, 1975) [hereafter Bram, *Mathesis*], p.1-9.

5. Patrick Bruun. 'The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine', *Arctos*, (1958), Vol. 2, p. 15-37.
6. Bram, *Mathesis*, p. 118, n. 60.
7. Molnar, *Star*, p. 96-101.
8. *Tetrabiblos* II.3. See also Molnar, *Star*, p. 46-48, 110-111.
9. Bram, *Mathesis* 4.3.9.
10. Tamsyn Barton, 'Augustus and Capricorn: Astrological Polyvalency and Imperial Rhetoric', *Journal of Roman Studies*, (1995), Vol. 85, p. 33-51.
11. David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, (New York, 1989), p. 95-103, 108-110.
12. Molnar, *Star*, p. 96-101.
13. In Bram's translation Firmicus writes 'men of almost divine and immortal nature', implying that he was hesitant about the divinity of either or both men.