

A Teachers Thoughts

STEVEN BIRCHFIELD A.M.A, 2020

The Lessons in natal delineation that we teach in classical or medieval astrology are many times, by today's standards, controversial. When we teach lessons like whether a subject will survive birth and childhood or on finding the Hyleg, we are looking at the 'bread and butter' considerations of the ancients when delineating a nativity; *i.e.* the considerations concerning longevity and length of life.

There are some things about this teaching that we need to keep in mind. The prediction of death is not to be taken lightly or used irresponsibly. There are several ethical and moral ramifications of this subject. But the self-appointed, sanctimonious, self-righteous opportunist who admonishes that we should not teach these subjects or predict death should please take heed that I am not urging students to burden their subject clients with predictions of death or their loved ones death. I would merely intend to bring forward the study of the methods by which death was predicted by professional astrologers when astrology was considered the highest science. This is an ongoing work where it is yet dangerous to cast anything into stone and you are hereby being advised to study it as such!

I give my students the full counsel of everything I know or believe regarding this subject. With knowledge comes responsibility and accountability. I do not tell my clients, you are going to live so or so many years. The information I derive from the chart only helps me to place other issues in the chart into perspective. In fact, it is quite impossible to accurately predict a subject's deeds and fortune without the careful and wise consideration of longevity! I believe that the subject matter is absolutely necessary to the study of 'traditional' astrology.

But this is not something that should be attempted in practice until the student has mastered the full battery of delineation techniques taught and advocated by the ancients. This subject matter is not entertainment! The astrologer delineating a client's or native's 'longevity' has entered the 'guts' of the native's soul, so to speak, and must be discreet, compassionate and careful. We need to "walk circumspect as wise". The word "circumspect" means to be cautious, carefully considering all the related circumstances and possible results of one's actions, decisions and judgments. I have some very strong feelings about this teaching myself. This is not a teaching that one should make 'general' and there is a reason the ancients did not teach everything they knew on the subject. In the hands of the foolish, this kind of teaching is potentially very harmful.

We should never be afraid to know the truth. King David wrote in the Psalms,

Lord, make me to know my end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am...teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.¹

By numbering our days, we are made aware of the fact that our lives are truly like the grass of the field that is here today and gone tomorrow. For some people, this kind of information motivates humility and spurs loving actions to live one's life fully in the service of others and God. For other people, it is a further excuse to 'live like hell' selfishly – eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die! While I believe this knowledge is a gift of God, like everything

¹ Psalms 39:4 & Psalms 90:12 from the King James Version of the Bible

in the world, it can be used for good or evil. Therefore, we do have to be very discriminate with this teaching. I still have to spend time in prayer seeking wisdom in how to share these kinds of things. It is a responsibility that I personally do not take lightly. I honestly try not to lean to my own understanding of these things and my own wisdom and it is not something I freely volunteer! We have to make every effort to be right, but realise we can err.

While I encourage each of my students to practice delineation of longevity from the beginning, I exhort them also to do this privately for their own edification, not for showing off, terrorising some subject, or attracting attention to themselves. The student will look the fool if they make a prediction before they understand what they are doing. They will be a cruel fool if they are right in their prediction and unwise in their behaviour. Wisdom requires long and attentive study of the matter of death before predicting it. It is one thing to predict longevity, another thing to communicate what you think you know to the subject.

In some instances we can read that this question was merely a question of logic and common sense. For example a man who came to consult Abu Ma'shār was fearful of a certain year in his nativity. Abu Ma'shār asked him if he knew how long his father had lived, and, when he replied in the affirmative, asked if he had yet reached that age and was told that he had already passed it. After a similar query concerning his mother, Abu Ma'shār inquired as to his grandfather and learned that he had not yet outlived him. Abu Ma'shār then informed him that if the year of his life in which hyleg became unfavourable equalled the age of his grandfather, he would certainly die, but if not, there was some hope of safety.² Abu Ma'shār's treatment of the question was no more complicated than this; an examination of family heritage.

The question we as astrologers have to ask ourselves is, "Why do I want to know this? Why do I want this knowledge?" For King David, his motivation was humility and love of God, "...that I may know how frail I am and apply my heart unto Wisdom"! What is ours? Only an honest answer to that question will give one the answer of whether or not they should study this further, privately and under close tutelage of someone who understands these techniques.

In the words of my teacher,

We are at the greatest risk of being wrong when we act from the position of thinking we know! In the end, it is wise(est) to study much and say little.³

The textual transmission of the Classical and Medieval methods of predicting the natives' length of life, or longevity, presents us with several problems. The first problem is the form of the textual transmission. What we often have as text is the final product of several translations and copyists thus making room for clerical or copyist errors. Then there is the possibility that the authors and/or translators themselves may have had their own agenda's and purposely wrote in errors, or deliberately misinformed, or withheld pertinent information, or paraphrased using their own, often astrologically unqualified, understanding of the text. Often the subject matter, such as longevity, was the target of religious bias and was a part of the motivation of the Inquisition.

Today we like to pride ourselves in the 'freedom of information'. However, it is clear from the historical records that the ancients most certainly did not share these modern values for

² Abū Sa'īd Shādhān, Discourses with Abū Ma'shār on the Secrets of Astrology – Paraphrase by Lynn Thorndike in the article "*Albumasar in Sadan*", published by History of Science Society in the journal, *Isis*, Volume 45, Number 1 1954

³ Robert Zoller's Introductory words to his lesson on Longevity in his Diploma Course in Medieval Astrology.

various reasons: not least, that if they shared everything then their usefulness and livelihood soon came to an end.

Another problem we face is the often all too obvious differences of technique and opinion that is found from one astrologer to another. I do not think this is as great a problem as we enjoy making it out to be today! I wonder if this is truly such a problem. Bonatti, who compiled much of the medieval astrological teachings of former astrologers at its entrance into Europe, was obviously faced with these same differences. He did not find it a problem at all. In fact, in reading what Bonatti says about discovering the Hyleg (and he seems to favour Omar in his method) a quote really struck me. It has nothing to do with the Hyleg per se, but it has to do with the assertion that the ancients ‘quibbled’ over everything.

Bonatti writes,

There was a diversity of opinion among the wise regarding the Hyleg although not contrariety.

This statement does not compute with most western cultures today! So you may ask, “You mean it is possible to have a diversity of opinion without disagreeing (contrariety)?” My answer is, absolutely! What Bonatti noticed is that these varying opinions often filled in where another’s opinion left off! Now the realisation of this truth regarding the ancients and their differences brings me to the problem and alternatives I face in teaching the subject of longevity!

I have several alternatives that I can resort to in order to teach this subject. First, I could simply reproduce the extant texts on the matter for the student to read and study. This is of course fraught with its own problems. A new student to classical and medieval astrology is often unprepared to wade through the strange and sometimes ambiguous terminologies of the ancients, not to mention understand philosophical concepts often totally foreign to modern thought.

Second, I could simply present the student with my own interpretation of medieval and classical techniques, a sort of professional commentary upon the work of my predecessors. This is, after all, what the Hellenistic tradition was; commentaries and opinions based upon the authors appraisal of his own experience and the opinions of his contemporaries and predecessors.

Third, I could use the method as taught by Robert Zoller for example, and present a translation and paraphrase which I then interpret for the student and explain how it ought to be understood and applied.

I have opted for a fourth method that contains elements of all of the above. As Bonatti emphasises and I concur with him, the existence of diverse opinions that do not disagree requires that we change our perceptions of these teachings.

Robert Zoller wrote,

The complete study of astrology, therefore, consists of not merely digging up the writings of the ancients and assiduously studying them, but penetrating their inner

*meaning and re-discovering their perceptual mode. We must ultimately see the world as the ancients did if we are to understand their metaphysics.*⁴

In a similar manner, Rob Hand also wrote,

*For astrology to develop a proper philosophical foundation, we have to go back to philosophy as it was prior to the taking of that fork. We have to use pre-medieval Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras, Plotinus, the Stoics, and other philosophies of that kind in order to find what might be a foundation for a philosophy of astrology. And when we do, we find that these philosophers did in fact provide the philosophical foundation of late classical astrology although it is not always clear that astrologer-practitioners were aware of as it's having one. These astrologers, whose writings we have, were a practical lot and did not always have their own theoretical underpinnings in mind when practicing astrology, although it is also clear that they sometimes did...*⁵

Quite simply what we are reading in these ancients' texts is not necessarily rules that they were imposing, but rather, they were really their judgments based upon common perceptions and philosophical foundations! This is why the compilations of aphorisms we have today are often traps of misunderstanding into which we can easily fall. So, while considering carefully the judgments of our predecessors, I want to also focus on their perceptions that led to those judgments, for those are the true postulates and axioms underpinning astrology. This is no more greatly evident than in the teachings concerning Longevity!

In the study of Longevity, you will find it touches many aspects of classical and medieval astrology; *i.e.* longevity techniques and method are a kind of summation of all classical and medieval astrology! There are many features of longevity methods that you will find useful in almost every particular of delineation and prediction; from generally analysing the entire natal constellation and viewing the chart through multiple layers of rulership to particulars of identifying specific signifiers such as the Hyleg (giver of life), the Alchocoden (the giver of years of life) and the Anaraeta (the giver of death). You will also learn the relationship between the area of influence of the planets (the ecliptic) and its corresponding relative motion through time (the equator) that longevity techniques equate an arc of life (measured on the ecliptic) to a span of life in time (measured by the diurnal motion of the equator).

My hope, through these studies, is that we ultimately can come to an understanding of the course of our lives. Our lives have a beginning, middle and an end. The goal is wisdom to understand our purpose and significance which requires that we look our own mortality in the face. What we might gain through this is an understanding of fate and a measure of our own life, a sense of the fleeting character that is our life! Life is precious, and it is important to live in the present cultivating the spiritual well-being and doing 'good'!

Modern western 'humanism' would like to insulate us from death and limit our contact with death to as little as possible. Just look at how western journalism never shows western audiences the true face of death in their reporting of conflicts and natural disaster. They

⁴ Preface of his textbook on Longevity, *Tools and Techniques for the Medieval Astrologer Part I*, 3rd edition, by Robert Zoller and published by New Library Limited ©2003

⁵ On Matter and Form in Astrology by Rob Hand ©2005, the article was published in an abbreviated form in *Geocosmic Journal* for autumn 2006. Quotes are taken from the complete, unabridged article which covers considerably more ground than the version in the journal.

attempt to engender this delusion that we will live forever and all is well, so go back to sleep and do not be concerned over such unnecessary subjects. But there is nothing in this world as certain as death! Whatever is born will most certainly die. The ancient astrologers were above all else, realists and dealt with death directly. In the west today, we need specially trained teams of psychologists to help people face the frequent forms of adversity that were common to not only the ancients, but very much common today for the other two thirds of our contemporary world; e.g. war, famine, disease and natural disaster.