



Mercury

It can be assumed with a fair amount of probability that the planet that caused the disturbances described above was the planet Mercury, the Greek Hermes, the Babylonian Nebo.

To each of the planets is ascribed a world age, and the ages of the other planets—Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, and Mars—are well discernible; the dominion of Mercury must be looked for in one of the world ages, and one of the world cataclysms was apparently ascribed to this lesser planet.⁽¹⁾ Mercury was a feared god long before Mars (Nergal) became one. As the name of Mount Sinai refers to Sin, the Moon, so the name of Mount Nebo in Moab where Moses died⁽²⁾ was called already in that early time by the name of the planet Mercury. Later in the seventh and sixth centuries before the present era, this god was much venerated, especially by the Chaldeans and other peoples of Mesopotamia, as the names of Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar prove.⁽³⁾ In earlier times Mercury was known to the Sumerians as Enki.⁽⁴⁾

Equally pronounced was the position of Thoth, the planet Mercury of the Egyptian pantheon, the theophoric part of the name Thutmose.⁽⁵⁾ For the northern peoples, Mercury was Odin.⁽⁶⁾

It is characteristic that in many astronomical texts Mercury, the Greek Hermes, the Babylonian Nebo, the Egyptian Thoth, is portrayed as the planet-god which had in his dominion the physiological capacity of memory in man,⁽⁷⁾ as well as that of speech. According to Augustine, “speech is Mercury.”⁽⁸⁾

Direct information that confirms our assumption is provided by Hyginus. Hyginus wrote that for many centuries men “lived without town or laws, speaking one tongue under the rule of Jove. But after Mercury explained the languages of men (whence he is called *hermeneutes*, ‘interpreter,’ for Mercury in Greek is called Hermes; he, too, divided the nations) then discord arose among mortals. . . .”⁽⁹⁾

The Romans as well as the Greeks pictured Mercury with wings, either on his headgear or at his ankles,⁽¹⁰⁾ and with an emblem, the caduceus, a staff with two snakes winding. The double serpent (caduceus), the emblem of Mercury, is found in ornaments of all peoples of antiquity; a special treatise could be written about this subject; I found the caduceus all around the world.⁽¹¹⁾ Mercury, or Hermes of the Greeks, was a messenger of the gods that speeded on his errand, sent by Jupiter.⁽¹²⁾

Among the satellites that presently orbit each of the giant planets are bodies comparable in size to Mercury, or even larger.⁽¹³⁾ Abraham Rockenbach, whose *De Cometis Tractatus Novus Methodicus* we had occasion to quote when investigating the causes of the Deluge, included in his treatise also the following entry:

In the year of the world one thousand nine hundred and forty-four, two hundred and eighty-eight years after the Deluge, a comet was seen in Egypt of the nature of Saturn, in the vicinity of Cairo, in the constellation of Capricorn, and within the

space of sixty-five days it traversed three signs in the sky. Confusions of languages and dispersals of peoples followed. On this the text of the eleventh chapter of Genesis speaks in more detail. [\(14\)](#)

From the annals of modern astronomy we know of cases when a comet traveling on an elongated orbit was “caught” by the planet Jupiter, by which is meant the change of the cometary orbit to one of a short period, with the sun in the focus of its orbit.

It is possible to reconstruct the planetary disturbances of that age with some approximation. In my understanding Mercury was once a satellite of Jupiter, or possibly of Saturn. In the course of the events which followed Saturn’s interaction with Jupiter and its subsequent disruption, Mercury was pushed from its orbit and was directed to the sun by Jupiter. It could, however, have been a comet and the entwined snakes of the caduceus may memorialize the appearance it had when seen by the inhabitants of the Earth. At some point a contact occurred between the magnetospheres of Mercury and the Earth, described in the traditions of various nations. [\(15\)](#)

That the Earth was once a satellite of a giant planet is nothing more than a surmise; we dealt with it only as with a hypothetical construction, requiring further elucidation. But with a greater show of support derived from the mythological and folkloristic sources we have tried to demonstrate on the case of Mercury that once it had been a satellite of one of the giant planets and was “directed” by Jupiter closer to the sun. [\(16\)](#)

The claim therefore is that Mercury has traveled on its present orbit for only some five or six thousand years. This view conflicts with both the nebular and the tidal theories of the origin of the planetary family, and with the assumption that the planets have occupied the same orbits for billions of years.

References

1. [Among the reasons which suggest that Mercury was the planet which caused the catastrophe of the confusion of languages is the fact that the age of Mercury follows that of Saturn. In the Hindu conception of the world ages, Satya yuga, the Saturnian age, was brought to a close by a general flood. Cf. Sir William Jones, “On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India,” *Asiatick Researches* I (1799), p. 234: “. . . The Satya, or (if we may venture to call it) the Saturnian age was, in truth, the age of the *general* flood” (emphasis in text). Mercury appeared soon after the beginning of the next age, the Treta yuga; and for at least a part of this age men lived under the aegis of Mercury. In Hindu astronomy the usual name for the planet Mercury was Budha. In the *Bhagavatamrita* it is said that “Budha [Mercury] became visible the 1002nd year of the Cali yug.” According to John Bentley, “the 1002nd year of the Cali yug [astronomical era] corresponds . . . with “the 179th year of the Treta yug of the poets.” “Remarks on the Principal Aeras and Dates of the Ancient Hindus,” *Asiatick Researches* V (1799), pp. 320f. The *Bhagavatamrita* describes in mythical language the first appearance of Mercury. See W. Jones, “On the Chronology of the Hindus,” *Asiatick Researches* II (1799), p. 122. Jones also placed “the ancient Budha, or Mercury . . . about the beginning of the Treta yug.” In Hindu lore Budha, or Mercury, is said to have married Ila, the daughter of Satyavrata, the Manu of the Satya yuga, in whose days the Deluge occurred. This is but a way of saying that the time of Mercury’s prominence was shortly after the Deluge, the age of Saturn, the Satya yuga. *The Matsya Puranam* ed. and transl. by Jamna das Akhtar (Delhi, 1972), ch. xi.

Among the descriptive epithets applied to Mercury in India, were *budha*—"mind, spirit, intelligence," *sarvagna*—"all-knowing," *shadhabhigna*—"possessor of the six sciences," *advayavadi*—"eloquent, unequalled in speech." See Fr. Paulinus, *Systema Brahmanicum* (Rome, 1791), pp. 156f. The presence of the god could induce forgetfulness. (*The Matsyapuram* XI. 61).].

2. Deuteronomy 34: 1-5; cf. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, p. 124, n. 3.
3. [Nebo was regarded as the son of Marduk, or Jupiter. His chief cult center in Babylonia was Borsippa, whose ziggurat, or stepped pyramid, was consecrated to Nebo. In the Talmud (Sanhedrin XI. 109a) the ruins of this structure were considered to be the remains of the Tower of Babel. (Cf. Obermeyer, pp. 314, 327, 346). It was of these ruins that R. Yochanan is reported to have said "a third of the tower was burnt, a third sunk [into the earth], and a third is still standing." The Talmud next quotes Rab as having said "The atmosphere of the tower causes forgetfulness."

Nebo was also thought of as the herald of the gods, and as presiding over all matters pertaining to the intellect. Cf. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, Vol. I, pp. 121, 123, 238; Cf. the prayer of Assurbanipal: "For Nebo the perfect son, regulator of all things in heaven and earth, him that holds the tablet of wisdom, carrier of the stylus of fate. . . ." S. Langdon, *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms* (Paris, 1909), p. 129.].

4. ["The Sumerians believed that there was a time when all mankind spoke one and the same language, and that it was Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, who confounded their speech"—so concluded S. N. Kramer after publishing his translation of a Sumerian epic fragment. See S. N. Kramer, "The 'Bable of Tongues' : A Sumerian Version," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, pp. 108-111. The text of the tablet is translated by Kramer as follows:

The whole universe, the people in unison To Enlil in one tongue ___ Enki ___ the leader of the gods, Endowed with wisdom ___ Changed the speech in their mouths (brought) contention into it, Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.

Cf. K. Seybold, "Der Turmbau zu Babel," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (197x), pp. 453-479; J. van Dijk, "La 'Confusion des langues' . Note sur le lexique et sur la morphologie d'Enmerkar, 147-155," *Orientalia* 39 (1970), pp. 302-310; B. Alster, "An Aspect of 'Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta' ," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 67 (1973), pp. 101-109.

The Sumerian Enki was the same as the Babylonian Ea; See for instance M. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens* (Giessen, 1905), Vol. I, p. 62. The name Ea was written with the ideogram EN.KI. Students of Babylonian astronomy are well aware that "by 'Star of the god Ea' Mercury is meant." *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 667, note 2.].

5. Cf. P. Boylan, *Thoth the Hermes of Egypt* (Oxford, 1922). [Diodorus wrote (I. 17. 3) that when Isis took over the kingdom from Osiris, Hermes (i.e., Thoth) became her chief counsellor. This means that the planet Mercury was prominent in the period after Jupiter replaced Saturn as the dominant planet. Diodorus also wrote that it was by the Egyptian Hermes "that the common language of mankind was first further articulated" (I. 16. 1).

An Egyptian hymn calls Thoth the deity that “made different the tongue of one country from another.” (J. Cerny, “Thoth as Creator of Languages,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 34 (1[48], pp. 121-122.) Another text tells that this god “distinguished (or separated) the tongue of country from country.” (*Ibid.*, p. 121). Yet another recounts that he “distinguished the tongue of every foreign land.” (*Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*) Cerny comments that the words “made different” or “distinguished” or “separated” are “past participles alluding probably to some lost myth or legend according to which Thoth differentiated the languages of the various countries. These epithets might even be cited as evidence of an Egyptian parallel to the Hebrew fable of Yahwe and the Tower of Babel.” Cf. J. G. Griffith, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, pp. 263f. In Egyptian texts Thoth was called “lord of divine words” and “mighty in speech” ; according to E. A. W. Budge, “from one aspect he is speech itself . . . Thoth could teach a man not only words of power, but also the manner in which to utter them. . . . The words, however . . . must be learned from Thoth.” Thoth was also known as “scribe of the gods” and “lord of books.” (*The Gods of the Egyptians* [London, 1904], vol. I, p. 401; cf. P. Boylan, *Thoth the Hermes of Egypt* [Oxford, 1922] and B. von Turayeff, “Zwei Hymnen an Thoth,” *Zeitschrift fuer Aegyptische Sprache* 33 [1895], pp. 120-125).

In the dialogue *Phaedrus* (sect. 274-275), Plato presents a story about the invention of letters by Thoth, and explores some of the implications of this new skill. It “will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves.” (transl. by B. Jowett)].

6. [See Tacitus, *Germania* IX, transl. by H. Mattingly (1948): “Above all they worship Mercury, and count it no sin to win his favor on certain days by human sacrifices.” Odin was the head of the Nordic pantheon. Matthew of Westminster (Flores ed., 1601, p. 82) transmits a speech by Saxon envoys to Britain ca. 450 A.D.: “*Deos patrios, scilicet Saturnum, Jovem atque ceteros, qui mundum gubernant, colimus, maxime autem Mercurium, quem lingua nostra Voden apellamus.*”—“We worship the gods of our fathers, that is, Jupiter, Saturn, and the rest of those that rule the world, but most of all [we worship] Mercury, whom in our language we call Voden.”

Of Odin it was said: “He spoke so well and so smoothly that all who heard him believed all he said was true.”—*Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, transl. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin, 1964), pp. 10-11. He was associated with Hugin or “thought” and Munin or “memory.”

One of the myths about Odin connects him with the multiplicity of languages. In the *Gylfaginning*, ch. XIX, it is said that the reason why Odin is known by many different names is “the fact that there are in the world so many different languages.”]

7. [*Hermes*. “The planet Mercury [is] the deity which presides over the rational energy,” wrote the neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry (*On the Wanderings of Ulysses*, transl. by Th. Taylor [London. 1823], p. 259) and Proclus, the last great representative of that school, elaborated in his description of Mercury’s powers: “(Mercury) unfolds into light intellectual gifts, fills all things with divine reasons, elevates souls to intellect, wakens them as from a profound sleep. . . .” (*In Euclidi Elementa* lib. I, par. 14; cf. *idem*, *In Platonis Rem Publicam*, ed. Nauck, I. 255, II. 221). Proclus also described Hermes as “responsible for distinguishing and interpreting things,

recalling to memory the sources of the intellect” (*In Platonis Rem Publicam* II. 224).

Nebo. See above, n. 3

Thoth. An Egyptian hymn assigns to Thoth control over man’s mnemonic powers, invoking him as the deity “that recalls all what had been forgotten.” (R. Hari, *Horemheb et le Reine Moutnedjemet* [Geneva, 1965]).].

8. *The City of God* VII. 14. 1. [Servius called Mercury “et orationis deus et interpret deorum” (*In Vergili Aeneidem* IV. 239). Arnobius (*Adversus Gentes* III. 32) argued that Mercury is simply speech and words exchanged in conversation. Cf. Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V. 2; Clement of Alexandria, *Homilia* VI. xv; Macrobius wrote in his *Saturnalia*: “scimus autem Mercurium vocis et sermonis potentem.” Proclus, (*Commentaire sur le Timee*, transl. by Festugiere, Vol. V, p. 237) asserted that “la faculte de langage [correspond a] Hermes. . . .” Cf. F. Buffiere, *Les Mythes d’Homere et la Pensée grecque* (Paris, 1956), pp. 289ff. A scholium to Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, Act. IV, scene I, and a scholium to Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* 1. 517 provide further details about Mercury’s association with language.].
9. Hyginus, *Fabulae*, no. 143: “Phoroneus,” transl. by M. Grant in *The Myths of Hyginus* (University of Kansas Publications: Lawrence, 1960). Here Mercury is made directly responsible for the confusion of languages. “The meaning is clearly that Hermes invented one language for one people, another for another. The whole account reminds one of the Biblical Tower of Babel.” *ibid.*, p. 118.
10. According to Servius (*In Vergili Aeneidem Commentarii* IV. 239) “Mercurius ideo dicitur habere pennas, quia citius ab omnibus planetis in ortum suum recurrit unde et velox et errans inducitur, ut (*Georgica* I. 337) ‘quos ignis caeli Cyllenius erret in orbes.’”
11. The caduceus was an emblem of the Babylonian deity Ningishzida, and an astronomical tablet from Boghazkoi identifies Ningishzida with Nebo-Mercury (Weidner, *Handbuch der babylonischen Astronomie*, p. 61). Cf. H. Th. Bossert, *Altsyrien* (Tuebingen, 1951), p. 139, figs. 442 & 445. H. Schliemann found the caduceus at Mycenae. Ancient Mexican codices portray the worship of entwined snakes. See Lord Kingsborough, *The Antiquities of Mexico* (London, 1830), Vol. II, p. 4. Cf. H. B. Alexander, *Latin American Mythology* (*Mythology of All Races*, Vol. XI (1920), p. 72; cf. also Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*, (New York, 1935), p. 137.
12. Homer, *The Odyssey* VI; Vergil, *The Aeneid* IV. 239.
13. Jupiter’s satellite Ganymede is larger than Mercury, and Saturn’s biggest moon, Titan, is almost as large.
14. *De Cometis Tractatus Novus Methodicus* (Wittenbergae, 1602), pp. 113f.: “Anno mundi millesimo, nongentesimo, quadragesimo quarto. Anno post diluvium, ducentesimo octuagesimo octavo, Cometa in Aegypto naturam Saturni referens, circa Alcairum, in dodecatemorio Capricorni visus est, hicque spatio sexaginta quinque dierum, tria signa in coelo percurrit. Hunc confusiones linguarum, dissipationes gentium in toto terrarum orbe, sunt secutae. De quibus Genes. undecimo capite, prolixius textus dicunt.” Cf. J. Hevelius, *Cometographia* (1668).

15. [In Babylonian sources the destructive acts of Nebo are recorded: "The lofty one, furious . . . the word of him . . . causes the earth beneath to shudder, the word which in his glory he spoke. . . Waters have flooded the wide land." S. Langdon, *Babylonian Liturgies* (Paris, 1913), p. 65.]
16. Cf. R. S. Harrington and T. C. van Flandern, "A Dynamical Investigation of the Conjecture that Mercury is an Escaped Satellite of Venus," *Icarus* 28, (1976), pp. 435-440.

