



Jupiter of the Thunderbolt

Nobody who observes a thunderstorm would arrive at the conclusion that the planet Jupiter sends the lightning. Therefore it is singular that peoples of antiquity pictured the planet-god Jupiter as wielding a thunderbolt—this is equally true of the Roman Jupiter, the Greek Zeus, and the Babylonian Marduk.

Pliny wrote:

It is not generally known what has been discovered by men who are the most eminent for their learning, in consequence of their assiduous observations of the heavens, that the fires which fall upon the earth, and receive the name of thunderbolts (*fulminum nomen habeant*) proceed from the three superior stars (*siderum*), but principally from the one which is situated in the middle . . . and hence it is commonly said, the thunderbolts are darted by Jupiter.⁽¹⁾

Pliny knew the origin of lightning in the friction of clouds—he wrote that “by the dashing of two clouds, the lightning may flash out.”⁽²⁾ He did not confuse lightning with the thunderbolt that is discharged by the planets. He makes a distinction between “earthly bolts, not from stars,” and “the bolts from the stars.”⁽³⁾ Pliny knew that the Earth is one of the planets: “Human beings are distributed all around the earth and stand with their feet pointing towards each other . . . Another marvel, that the earth herself hangs suspended and does not fall and carry us with it.”

The planet-god Jupiter was frequently shown with a thunderbolt in his hand. The electrical discharge coming from Jupiter is described in many ancient texts. In the Orphic Hymn to Jupiter the Thunderer, he is described as he “who shak’st with fiery light the World.” “From thee proceeds th’ethereal lightning’s blaze, flashing around intolerable rays.” “Horrid, untamed, thou rollest thy flames along. Rapid, ethereal bolt, descending fire, the earth . . . trembles.”⁽⁴⁾ The earth does not quake when struck by regular lightnings. The bolt of Jupiter falls from the azure sky, not veiled by clouds.

The electrical discharge from a planet is described very clearly by Pliny: “heavenly fire is spit forth by the planet as a crackling charcoal flies from a burning log.”⁽⁵⁾ “It is accompanied by a very great disturbance of the air,” produced “by the birth-pangs, so to speak, of the planet in travail.”

Also Seneca discerns between “the lesser bolts” which seek “houses and undeserving homes” and the bolts of the planet Jupiter “by which the threefold mass of mountains fell.”⁽⁶⁾

In the Babylonian epic, the *Enuma Elish*, it is told how Marduk, or the planet Jupiter, “raised the thunderbolt, his mighty weapon. He mounted the chariot, the storm unequalled for terror. . . . With overpowering brightness his head was crowned.” He is also described as the planet-god “at whose battle heaven quaked, at whose wrath the Deep is troubled . . . in the bright firmament his course is supreme . . . with the evil wind his weapons blaze forth, with his flame steep mountains are destroyed. . . .”⁽⁷⁾ A hymn to

Marduk tells that “by his warfare the heaven resounds; before his anger the deep is shaken; before his sharp weapon the gods draw back.” [\(8\)](#)

The Egyptian pharaoh Seti described Amon as “a circling star which scatters its seed in fire . . . like a flame of fire . . . irresistible in heaven and in earth.” [\(9\)](#)

Brihaspati, or the planet Jupiter in Hindu astronomy, is invoked in the Rig Veda as one who “in destroying enemies cleaves apart their cities Brihaspati strikes the enemy with his thunderbolts.” [\(10\)](#) Shiva is called “wielder of the thunderbolt.” [\(11\)](#)

In *Worlds in Collision* the overpowering of one planet by another in conjunctions was quoted from the Hindu astronomical books; the electrical power which manifests itself in conjunctions is called *bala*. Jupiter as the strongest planet is a *balin*. [\(12\)](#)

References

1. Pliny, *Natural History*, transl. by J. Bostock and H. Riley (London, 1865), Book. II, ch. 18.
2. *Ibid.*, ch. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, II. 53.
4. *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus*, transl. by Th. Taylor (London, 1846). [In the Iliad Homer calls Zeus “Lord of the bright lightning” ; “even he [the ocean] hath fear of the lightning of great Zeus whenso it crashes from heaven.” (XX. 197f.) Hesiod recounts a battle among the planetary gods in which Zeus took an active part: “From heaven and from Olympus he came forthwith, hurling his lightning: the bolts flew thick and fast . . . whirling an awesome flame . . . It seemed as if Earth and wide Heaven above came together; for such a mighty crash would have arisen if Earth were being hurled to ruin and Heaven from on high were hurling her down.” It was in this battle the Zeus is said to have made use of his thunderbolts for the first time.]
5. *Natural History*, II. 18.
6. Seneca, *Thyestes*, transl. by F. J. Miller (1917), lines 1077ff.
7. King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, IV. 45f, 58.
8. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babylonien und Assyrien*, Ch. XVII, p. 495. Jupiter was also known in Babylonia as Dapinu, “he of the dreadful glow” (Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier*; p. 129). Marduk’s “word” causes “shuddering below” (Langdon, *Tammuz and Ishtar*, p. 112). Cf. idem, *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms*, p. 41: “The word of Marduk is a flood which tears away the dikes.”
9. J. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago, 1906), Vol. III, par. 117. The worship of Amon, as the planet Jupiter was called in the Theban cult, became supreme with the Eighteenth Dynasty. Cf. G. A. Wainwright, “The Relationship of Amon to Zeus and his Connection with Meteorites,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 16 (1930), pp. 35-38.
10. *Rig-Veda*, Mandala VI. 73, transl. by H. Grassmann, pt. I (Leipzig, 1876).

11. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, p. 296.

12. *Surya Siddhanta*, ch. VII (transl. by Burgess).

