



Book Reviews

by Kenneth Irving

***An Introduction to Western Sidereal Astrology*, by Kenneth Bowser.
American Federation of Astrologers, Inc., 6535 South Rural Road,
Tempe, AZ 85283 (astrologers.com). 209 pages, paper. \$24.95.**

I'll begin this review by noting that there's a blurb from me on the back cover of this book, an acknowledgment that includes me in the front, that I

saw the book in manuscript, and that I advised the author during his efforts to find a home for it with a publisher. Added to that I will also say that I don't make a dime off a single sale of it, nor do I have any business relationship with Ken Bowser. We're just good friends, and have been for a long time, not to mention which I have felt for some time that the astrological publishing world is long overdue for a comprehensive book on Western sidereal astrology.

Anyone who was befuddled, confused, or alarmed by the ignorant attack on astrology by a Minnesota astronomy instructor last year should read this book. Even though *An Introduction to Western Sidereal Astrology* wasn't written to address that silliness as such, it supplies the facts that were missing in that case, and does so in a clear and organized way. For those who don't understand the meaning of "Western sidereal," it refers to the use of a zodiac that is fixed in relation to the stars. The zodiac you see used throughout this magazine (except for a little table at the end of the hourly guide called "Ingresses in the Sidereal Zodiac") is called a "tropical" zodiac, and it is fixed to the seasonal points called the equinoxes and solstices rather than to the stars. There is an ever-changing relationship between those seasonal points and the stars (termed the precession of the equinoxes), as the seasonal points move backward in relation to the stars. Thus, though the tropical and sidereal zodiacs each have 12 equal-length signs with the same names, at the current time most of the space called Aries in the standard Western zodiac used in this magazine, as one example, is called Pisces in the sidereal zodiac.

This is some necessary basic background and I won't try to add to it further within the confines of this review, except to say that which zodiac one should use has been the Great Debate in astrology since Cyril Fagan and Donald Bradley first introduced the sidereal zodiac to Western astrologers in the 1940s and 1950s. In Western countries, the tropical zodiac, then and now, prevails, but in Eastern countries (particularly India), sidereal zodiacs have dominated the astrological scene for many centuries. Notice that I used the plural "sidereal zodiacs" in that last sentence because Indian astrologers (and Western "Vedic" astrologers) are in some slight disagreement about the location of their zodiac in relation to the stars. Western sidereal is different, however, as it uses the historically original zodiac used by those who invented the concept, the Babylonians. A statement like this may sound like hype to some, but if you read Francesca Rochberg's scholarly works *The Heavenly Writing* or *Babylonian Horoscopes* you'll see that the following

statements are true: the Babylonians invented the zodiac, it was fixed to the stars, it had 12 equal-length signs of exactly 30 degrees each, and we know its exact location. Western sidereal uses that original zodiac, and Vedic astrology use something very close to it.

The book I'm reviewing here explains these facts well, and does so in a dispassionate and detailed way, but what Ken Bowser really does is to explain to the reader just how Western sidereal astrology uses the zodiac, the planets and their aspects, and to a lesser extent the houses, to do the most basic thing astrologers do — interpret birth charts. The first five chapters lay out the basics, and the sixth is a brief discussion of an important subject often ignored by astrologers (the role played by planets that rise, set, or culminate together). The seventh chapter is a small book in itself—and almost worth the price of the book at that—as Bowser provides the reader with his original, very detailed observations on the meaning of all 45 combinations involving the Sun, Moon, and planets through Pluto. The final three chapters show how all of these elements come together in interpretations of the charts of famous politicians, great minds, and notorious figures.

Having ended, however, the book begins anew with three appendices that are, like the chapter on planetary pairs, almost a book in themselves, as they provide a solid background in various matters that give the reader a deeper understanding of what is discussed in the main part of the book. They are addressed to the history, whys, and wherefores of the sidereal zodiac, as well as the Great Debate referred to above. Frankly, it is not easy to cover subjects such as these in plain English, but the author does an outstanding job of putting things in terms that should be understandable to the average reader while still respecting the scholarly and technical facts. This section *does* require study, but it is well worth it. Even if you come away from this book thinking that the sidereal zodiac is not your thing, understanding what is in these three appendices will give you the knowledge to comprehend just how nonsensical and misleading that astronomer's attack and others like it really are, and to explain the actual facts to your worried and confused friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Appendix One covers the history of astrology and how it relates to the Western sidereal zodiac, and Appendix Two provides background on the debate among astrologers on whether to use the tropical or sidereal zodiac, and why. Appendix Three presents a subject that goes to the very roots of

the modern rediscovery of the Babylonian zodiac: the origin of the exaltations. Astrologer Cyril Fagan, essentially the father of Western sidereal astrology, noticed certain facts about the “exaltation” degrees used in modern astrology — for example Venus is exalted in 27° Pisces; the Sun, in 19° Aries; the Moon, in 3° Taurus, and so on — that suggested they might be related to an actual event. The three named here are in fact very close to positions that could have been present at the starting event of a particular Babylonian year. Fagan investigated this possibility and arrived at the conclusion that the exaltation degrees mark a *series* of astronomical events during a specific year, 786 B.C., and that they were sidereal in origin. Fagan’s hypothesis is probably not known to many astrologers, but it should be, so having it summarized in an understandable way, as it is in this appendix, is important.

Taken together, these appendices are a well-honed argument for the use of the sidereal zodiac, yet the author presents them in a reasoned way that allows the reader to consider them in an equally reasoned fashion, which is to say that while he is making a case for the sidereal zodiac he is not proselytizing. The book as a whole presents facts, ideas, and techniques that are certainly useful in understanding and using the sidereal zodiac, but the information it contains is equally useful — and in some cases necessary — to someone who chooses to use the tropical zodiac. Kenneth Bowser’s *An Introduction to Western Sidereal Astrology* is well worth reading and well worth study, and is the best presentation on the subject of Western sidereal I have seen since Fagan himself — better in fact than what Fagan left us in book form.

Horoscope Guide