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ARTICLE II.

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM AND THE MAGI.

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ANNUALLY when Christmas comes round with its message of the Nativity of Christ, a renewed interest takes hold of us in the romantic account of the "wise men from the East," who followed the Star of Bethlehem from their distant homes to Judæa, there to worship the newborn king of the Jews, lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Ever since our childhood days this wonderful star that crowns our Christmas tree, and the dusky Magi with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, have added a touch of the romantic to the festival, that to Christendom brings a message of peace on earth and good will toward men.

How often has not our curiosity centered around these strange visitors of the Christ child, trying to penetrate the mystery that surrounds them! Throughout the history of the Christian church attempts at explaining this event have been made, and a whole library might be gathered of all the books and treatises that have been written on this subject. Nevertheless, up to the present day this mysterious problem does not seem to have lost any of its fascination, for quite recently it has again occupied the minds of scientists, and this time their efforts seem to have been crowned with some degree of success. For the problem of satisfactorily solving this interesting phenomenon has been advanced considerably with the

help of our present knowledge of the life and culture of the Ancient Orient, such as the pick and spade of archæologists and the scientific investigations of philologists have revealed to us.

In the early centuries of the Christian church the Star of Bethlehem and the Magi were surrounded with all kinds of legendary embellishment. The meager Biblical account of this remarkable event was not curious enough to satisfy the faith of the pious. To their minds it did not possess enough of the miraculous element. Additional miracles were therefore added to it, until the plain and simple account of Matthew was virtually buried beneath a heap of childish fables.

A second view is that of the liberal theologians. At all times they held that the account as we find it in Matt. ii. did not contain any historical facts, but was merely mythical. Adherents of the modern school of comparative study of religion hold a somewhat modified view. They have adduced parallel mythical accounts from all parts of the world in their attempt to show that the Biblical story represents but the Christianized form of some ancient myth, of which other and similar versions, they say, are to be found among people of other countries.

A third view is that of a great many who hold with the church father Chrysostom that the "star" was of a supernatural character. Whether it was a meteor, a comet, or a constellation, — all agree that it was a miraculous phenomenon which can be explained only by assuming a supernatural interference of God.

A fourth view seeks to offer an explanation that conforms more to the usual course of events as we observe them in nature, and which obviates the assumption of a miraculous element, where there is no absolute necessity for it. Those who

lean towards this view base their investigations principally on the observations of the famous astronomer Kepler, who claimed that the Star of Bethlehem was a so-called *stella nova*, one of those "new stars" that suddenly appear in the heavens and exhibit an unusual brightness. This they soon lose, however, and finally disappear altogether. Such a new star appeared in Kepler's days on October 10, 1604, and shortly afterwards a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn was observed in exactly the same location. While Kepler's "stella nova" theory was soon given up, the conjunction of the two planets, which he looked upon as a concomitant event merely, was identified with the Star of Bethlehem. Quite recently several German scientists, the astronomer Kritzinger, and the two theologians Zahn and Steinmetzer, a Lutheran and a Catholic, have taken up this theory anew, and with the addition of numerous valuable observations and computations not only have shed new light on the subject, but also have succeeded in adding an unusual degree of verisimilitude towards their solution of this interesting problem.

In this connection it is worth noting that St. Matthew's account also contains a hint, that seems to point to the fact that an explanation of the Biblical text in accordance with the principles both of modern astronomy and of ancient astrology is altogether within the confines of reasonable probability. For in connection with the Star of Bethlehem the text mentions the Magi, or wise men from the East, who were undoubtedly astrologers. In view of the fact that we now know that Babylonia was the original home of astrology, and from there made its powerful influence felt throughout the Ancient Orient, it seems quite probable that the Magi were Babylonian astrologers. They had observed the new star, and with the help of their astrological system had de-

terminated that the birth of a saviour of the world had taken place in the land of the Jews, in Judæa.

But we ask, What phenomenon in the starry heavens formed the basis for the astrological decision of the Magi? According to Kepler's modified theory the Star of Bethlehem consisted in a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of the fishes (Pisces) in the year 7 B.C., when these two planets formed a conjunction three times. In the course of time Kepler's theory has been perfected and developed as well as modified by a number of astronomers, but in its main points it has remained unchanged. Whereas a simple conjunction of these two planets takes place but once every twenty years, a threefold conjunction is something so unusual that, according to Kritzinger, all planets meet more frequently in one and the same constellation than a threefold conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn takes place. Besides, the distance between the two planets was unusually small at that time. It seems quite impossible that the astrologers of Babylonia should have failed to observe, and, moreover, have neglected to seek the import of this unusual phenomenon.

With the insufficient means at his command Kepler was not able to compute the exact date of these conjunctions; but recently May 28, October 3, and December 4, of the year 7 B.C., have been fixed as the exact dates by the German scientists Hontheim, Esch, and Kritzinger. As is well known, our calendar and the date it assigns to the birth of Christ are based on Dionysius Exiguus (555), and are not exact, Christ having been born from five to seven years earlier than the beginning of the Christian era.

We continue to ask, however, How did the Magi on the basis of this unusual phenomenon in the skies reach their well-known interpretation? In order to answer this with any

degree of certainty we would have to know the exact astrological rules that guided the Magi of that time and of their respective countries in that special case. Even though we are not able to do this, nevertheless the great mass of astrological tablets that have been found in the countries of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and our present-day knowledge of the Omen literature of that part of the Ancient Orient, enable us to point out in a general way the principles that guided the astrologers of that time in coming to a conclusion and in formulating their interpretations. Thus we can show how the Babylonian astrologers would have interpreted the unusual phenomenon of the year 7 B.C., and what very likely caused the Magi mentioned in connection with the birth of Christ to go to Judæa in search of a newborn king.

In ancient Babylonia astrology had been developed and practiced according to a regular system of rules and facts. The principles of this mystic science lacked to a great extent any reasonable objective proofs, and were thus, like most mystic cults, handed down from one generation to another with extreme accuracy and faithfulness. Accordingly we find the rules of interpretation that were in vogue in ancient Babylonia, in a more or less unaltered form, underlying the astrological systems of other countries many centuries later. It was a fundamental dogma of Babylonian science that everything on earth is but a reflex of what takes place in the heavens. In order, therefore, to forecast the future one must first find out the will of the gods, which evidences itself in the movement of the stars. Furthermore, different parts of the earth correspond to certain regions of the heavens. The North corresponds to Akkad, or Babylonia; the South, to Elam; the West, to the "Westland," which comprised a part of Syria, Phœnicia, and Palestine; the East, to Assyria. A

second principle of the magicians and astrologers of Assyria and Babylonia was that also the nature of an event that was to be forecasted could be deduced from heavenly phenomena. The sun and the moon represented the king; and since the sun is but seldom visible in the heavens together with the stars, Saturn becomes his representative. Jupiter also was considered a royal star.

On the basis of the above-mentioned two principles of Babylonian astrology, Professor Steinmetzer, of Prague, has offered an interpretation of the threefold conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 B.C. which we shall briefly follow in our discussion. For our purpose it is noteworthy that astronomic documents have actually been found, which go to show that the astrologers of the Ancient Orient paid special attention to astral conjunctions. For instance, from the time of Cambyses we have a tablet that gives a list of a number of such phenomena that happened during six months of the year 523 B.C. This tablet, which is a copy, served as a reference table for other similar chronicles. The Berlin Museum contains a most interesting and important witness to the fact that in the time of Christ the study of the heavens was not neglected. It is a papyrus (P 8279) which contains data concerning the position of five planets in the zodiac during the years 14–21 of the Emperor Augustus. How reasonable and probable does not this papyrus make it that such an unusual astronomical occurrence as the threefold conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 B.C. was observed and studied by the astronomers of the time!

But how did they interpret it? Since Jupiter and Saturn were both royal stars, the astrologers would naturally surmise that the phenomenon referred to some king. A further important means of solution was offered by the position of

the planets, for they met in the constellation of Pisces. Each point of the zodiac bore a significance of its own. The constellation of Pisces coincided with the "Westland." The order of arrangement of the different constellations of the zodiac begins with the "Taurus," since the point of spring was located there when astrology was developed in Babylonia about 3000-800 B.C.

As mentioned above, the "Westland" included Palestine, and in this way the Magi were caused to travel to the land of the Jews. Here we have a satisfactory explanation of the important question as to how the Magi came to connect Palestine with the particular star which they observed. A rather remarkable coincidence must be pointed out here. The Jewish savant Abarbanel (born 1437) avers that a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Pisces signified the Messiah to the Jewish astrologers, and in the Middle Ages astrologers quite generally interpreted the constellation of Pisces as referring to the Jewish nation.

We continue to ask, What further information did the star reveal concerning the king of the "Westland"? Modern Assyriologists have deciphered numerous astrological tablets from ancient Babylonia that deal with an eclipse. From these tablets we know that an eclipse or darkening of a star signified some evil, and the larger the eclipse was, the more direful was the resulting evil supposed to be. Of special importance for our consideration is a tablet which says: "If Jupiter stands in the middle of the moon, the king will die in that year." This omen refers to a case when Jupiter becomes invisible to the observer because it has passed behind the moon. Such an eclipse therefore meant the death of a king. A double eclipse of sun and moon foreshadowed the death of a great king. Inversely the unusually bright heliac

rising of the royal star Jupiter, coinciding with that of Saturn, must have been considered as forecasting the birth of a great king.

But phenomena that were accompanied by a great display of brightness were believed to bear some relation also to social occurrences in the world. There exist a number of cuneiform texts that show that such phenomena were deemed to be indicative of the welfare, peace, and prosperity of the land. And we have good reasons to assume that the extraordinary, threefold conjunction of the royal stars Jupiter and Saturn were interpreted by the Magi to mean: "A great king has been born in the Westland. He will bring peace with God and on earth, and justice and prosperity in the land."

In addition to all the various factors that caused the Magi to journey to Bethlehem, still another circumstance must be mentioned which in a remarkable way contributed to prepare the ancient world for the birth of Christ, for the coming of the Messiah. We know that since olden times there had existed in Babylonia the belief and hope in a king of peace, a saviour, who was to come at some future time. Similar ideas and expectations, as we know from Tacitus and Suetonius, were current, to a more or less degree, throughout the ancient world. They found their most concrete expression, however, among the Jews, whose Messianic hopes, coupled with their expectation of a great king of their race, who was to found a Jewish world empire, are quite well known.

Furthermore, a number of passages in the extra-Biblical literature of the Jews relate that the Jews expected that the birth of their Messiah was to be accompanied by the appearance of an unusual star in the heavens. They based this their belief on Num. xxiv. 17; and, according to their tradition, a similar phenomenon had occurred when Abraham was born.

It seems rather natural to assume that the Babylonian astrologers in the time of Christ, when the Jews everywhere made themselves so conspicuous, took notice also of the theories and views of Jewish astrologers, and thus were familiar with the Messianic hopes of the Jewish race.

If in conclusion we compare the theory, which we briefly sketched in the foregoing with the Biblical account of Matthew, it seems to us that the present interpretation in all essential points does full justice to the Gospel narrative, and presents a satisfactory solution of a most interesting problem of our Christmas story.

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