

In true marriage lies, nor equal, nor unequal,
Each fulfils defects in each.

—Tennyson.

Ah! the seasons that change around us
Are not of our lives a part,
What care we that it be December
If 'tis summer within the heart?

STAR OF THE MAGI.

MEANING OF THEIR VISIT TO BETHLEHEM.

In a land which the Gospel does not specify, but which can only be Chaldæa, Mesopotamia, Persia, or Arabia Petræ, for these are the countries described in Scripture under the vague name of the East, wise men, who sought in the book of the stars the secrets of the future Magi, as we call them, saw one day a new star in the sky, whether it were a meteor, a star properly so called, or a comet.

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI TO BETHLEHEM.

Struck with this phenomenon, they examined the traditions of their elders and masters, and, illuminated no doubt by divine light, they recognized the sign of the great ruler promised to Judæa. The Book of Daniel, in which was marked the succession of empires, and the time computed wherein the Son of Man was to come, could not be unknown to them. They were themselves perhaps descended from Balaam, the heathen prophet who had announced that a Star would arise from Jacob, and a Sceptre from the midst of Israel.

Three of them left their country and took the road to Jerusalem, where their rich and gorgeous caravan excited attention. They asked on all sides, and without throwing any doubt on the event which, according to them, must have been fulfilled, they went about, saying everywhere, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him."

When they saw they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy; and, lo, the star went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasures they presented unto him gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR VISIT.

No doubt there is more here than Oriental ceremony; the sages who came from afar were lighted by another light than that of an empty astrology; the star was a symbol of the brightness of God which shines in the conscience, and of the inspiration which leads souls to eternal truth. The Magi adored in this Child, born but yesterday, no future conqueror; they saw in Him Emmanuel the true Christ, laid in a poor cradle; enlightened by the Spirit, they believed and adored. No words have come down to us declaring their faith; but their presents had a deep meaning; they offered gold to the king of the age to come, incense to the priest, myrrh to the victim, who, by his death, was to found an eternal Kingdom and priesthood among men.

NATURE OF THE PHENOMENON THAT GUIDED THEM.

What was the star of the Messiah, the King of the Jews, which the Magi professed to have seen in the East, and which was the sign that announced His birth. No doubt we must see in it some celestial phenomenon, but of what nature the words of the first Evangelist do not permit us to determine.

If this extraordinary phenomenon was interpreted by the Magi as the sign of the birth of the King of the Jews, this proves, in the first place, their astrological occupation, and, in the second place, their knowledge of their religious traditions which were universal in the East, as Tacitus and Suetonius testify; traditions which announced about that time the coming of men from Judæa to subdue the world. The Jews of the dispersion had spread abroad in every direction their hopes of a Messiah. They were well known to Arabians and Parthians, even Chinese and Hindoos, Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, and there is no reason why these Magi from the land of Baalam should not have kept some remembrance of the star which their ancestors saw rising out of Jacob. The belief that such a star was to announce the birth of the Messiah did not come, in the first place from the Magi, but was part of the popular belief of the Jews as to the Messiah.

CONFIRMING THE HISTORIC CHARACTER OF THE GOSPELS.

The Magi spoke of it as a thing known and universally awaited. "We have seen," they said, "his star in the East." Those who questioned them, Herod and the Sanhedrin, heard nothing new from them as to the connection of the star with the birth of the Messiah; but at the news which the Magi brought, Herod and the whole city were moved. This universal belief does not take anything away from the historic character of the Gospel narrative, but rather confirms it. All the Gentile nations of antiquity were addicted to astrology, and believed that extraordinary revelations, principally having regard to the birth and death of illustrious men, were to be gathered from the stars, the comet, and the constellations.

ASTROLOGY AMONG THE JEWS.

The Jews were not, however, deficient in these astrological powers. They believed that a celestial phenomenon was to accompany the

birth of their Messiah, and they had always understood in a Messianic sense the words: "There shall come a star out of Jacob" (Numbers xxiv., 17). The belief in the star of the Messiah remained after Christ. The Sehar, remained after Christ. The Sehar, which dates from the first century, gives us numerous proofs of this. The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs says: "A special star as of a king shall rise for him in the heavens." In the time of Hadrian, when the false Messiah appeared, who called himself the Son of the Star—Bar-Kokbah—in allusion to the seventeenth verse of the twenty-fourth chapter of the Book of Numbers, the Jews rallied eagerly to him, because they believed that the ancient prophecy of Balaam was accomplished in him.

A PHENOMENON OUTSIDE THE LAWS OF NATURE.

The mythical school has only seen in this star a pure invention intended to give a new title to the Messiah. The rationalistic school, from the seventeenth century, has rather preferred to see in it a star like that which appeared in 1604 between Mars and Saturn, and just below Serpentarius at the time of the conjunction of the three planets, Jupiter, Saturn and Mars. This conjunction was calculated for the first time by Kepler, and soon after him by other astronomers, to recur every eight hundred years.

The Catholic school, without rejoining this astronomical indication, has not generally believed that it applies to the text of St. Matthew. The part which the star plays in the Gospel narrative hardly seems, indeed, consonant to the functions of an ordinary star. It went before the Magi, and led them on till it came and stood above the place where the Child was. The text does not allow us to distinguish two stars; one in the natural order, which warned the Magi in the East in the land whence they came, and another in the supernatural order, which led them to the home of the Child. It is one and the same star. If we interpret the passage strictly, it must be admitted that the Evangelist plainly indicates a phenomenon outside the laws of nature, produced directly by God in order to lead the Magi to recognize the Messiah.

KEPLER'S THEORY.

But although St. Matthew did not indicate the astronomical star of which Kepler speaks, he was the occasion of its discovery.

In the first year of the seventeenth century, while theologians in Germany were disputing ardently about the year of Jesus' birth, towards the end of the year 1603 a strange phenomenon appeared in the sky. On the 15th of December occurred the conjunction of the two planets, Jupiter and Saturn; in the spring of 1604 Mars was joined to them; and, further, a body like a fixed star appeared in the neighborhood of the two planets, towards the East, at the foot of the constellation Serpentarius. At first it was of an extraordinary brilliancy, like that of a star of the first magnitude, but insensibly grew paler. Scarcely visible in October, 1605, it finally disappeared in March, 1606. This conjunction the astrologers, and among them, no doubt, the Magi, as Kepler remarks, have always attached much significance, reappears every twenty years, but takes over eight hundred years to pass around the zodiac. This great astronomer sought to find out whether at the beginning of the Christian era, at the time of the birth of Jesus, such a conjunction might not have taken place. Now, his researches resulted in discovering the wonderful fact that the conjunction had indeed taken place in the year 747, in the second half of the sign Pisces, near to Aries, and in the spring of the following year, 648, Mars, under this sign, was joined to Jupiter and Saturn.

He thus explains the star of the Magi. The rare conjunction of the three planets excited the attention of the Magi, all the more that the phenomenon appears to have been accompanied by the apparition of an extraordinary star. Now, if we admit that this new star came a first, not only at the time when Saturn and Jupiter were near each other, that is to say, in June, 747, but also close by these planets, at in the years 1603, 1604 and 1605 of our epoch, the Chaldeans would surely have believed, according to the rules of their art, then in full vigor, that a great event had been accomplished.

If it is rigorously established by astronomical calculations that such a phenomenon was produced, it seems unlikely that the Persian or Chaldean astrologers, known as the Magi, should not have observed it; and if they did observe it, it is natural to conclude that they attached to it some mysterious signification, and notably the birth of that Personage expected in Judæa, who, according to tradition, was to be the Master of the world. The calculations of Kepler was carried on and brought to precision in Germany at the beginning of this century by Ploff, by Schubert, by Bamberg, and by Ideler.

THE DATE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH.

We may then conclude that if the star which showed itself in conjunction with Jupiter, Saturn and Mars appeared in 747, the Magi did not come to Jerusalem until the next year, we must place the birth of Jesus in 748 or 749 (after the foundation of the Roman Empire). It is yet to be established whether these mysterious travelers arrived at the very moment of the birth of Jesus, or a year afterwards, as St. Epiphanius, and others have believed. On this last hypothesis, we must place the birth of Jesus in 747 or 748, at the latest.—From *Pere Didon's "Life of Jesus Christ."*