

The STAR OF BETHLEHEM

WALDEMAR KAEMPFERT

THE reign of Herod had nearly ended when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem and asked: "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."

The news that a true "king of the Jews," a possible rival, was born, and that his birth had been heralded by celestial phenomena, caused Herod much concern. He summoned to him the scribes and learned men. When they were questioned where the king was to be born they answered: "In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda; for out of thee shall come a governor, that shall rule my people Israel." According to the authorized version it is then stated in the New Testament that "Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

That is the whole story of the Star of Bethlehem as it is simply and directly told in the second chapter of the gospel according to St. Matthew.

It was a cloister fancy of the dark ages, handed down through centuries, that led the Christian world to regard the Star of the East as a miraculous luminary, akin to the pillar of fire that guided the children of Israel in the wilderness—a luminary especially created for the sole purpose of leading the Magi to the birthplace of Christ. The modern Christian is more apt to regard the star as a natural phenomenon and



"SEE A STRANGE SPECTACLE IN THE SKY"



"AND HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM"



ADDITION OF THE PLANETS

to seek a scientific explanation of its sudden appearance, not for the purpose of casting doubt upon the narrative of Matthew, but of giving it astronomical support.

Who were these wise men, these Magi, of whom St. Matthew speaks? They came from the east, they said, and the east, according to the geographical knowledge of Matthew's day, was Chaldea, Persia, and that Arabian desert where the sons of Ishmael roamed. In that east of which they spoke, star-gazing was to some nations a religious observation, to others a mystical traditional rite. The "pseudo-science" of astrology out of which our modern science of astronomy was slowly evolved was thus engendered. Exegetes of the New Testament narrative hold these Magi to have been astrologers, members of that strange, non-national, privileged priesthood whose office it was to watch the sky each day and each night, to note the position and apparent motion of the sun from dawn to dark, and to predict those changes in planetary positions which, in that day of astrological superstition, were supposed to shape and reveal the destinies of kings and nations. In them science came an early worshipper at the feet of Christ.

To ancient as well as mediæval astrologers, certain groupings of the stars and planets had a fixed prophetic significance. The planets were named in accordance with their supposed influence. Mercury, always lurking near the sun, furtively gleaming in the morning or evening, was the patron of tricksters, knaves, and thieves. Mars, flaming in red, was the symbol of war, the guardian of heroes and warriors. If the Magi were astrologers who believed in stellar influences, the apparition of the Star of Bethlehem must have been an astronomical phenomenon. But no ordinary astronomical phenomenon could have enticed these practiced star-gazers from their temples. We must, therefore, find some celestial event sufficiently extraordinary to warrant a journey from Chaldea or Persia to Bethlehem.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, Herod was within a few weeks of his death. The massacre of the babes of Bethlehem was one of his last cruel deeds. When he inquired diligently what time the star appeared, the reply was evidently such that he felt it necessary to kill all male infants "from two years old and under." It is probable, therefore, that the Magi first saw the star two years before their arrival in Jerusalem. Herod died in B. C. 4. Hence the Star of Bethlehem must have appeared about two years before that date. We must discover, if we

can, an exceptional stellar event near B. C. 6 with which it may be identified.

Johann Kepler, in his peculiar genius (for he showed that the births of Enoch, Moses, Cyrus, Caesar, Charlemagne, and Luther were preceded by important astrological events), led the way in calling attention to the astronomical phenomena that preceded the birth of Christ. He pointed out that there must have been a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn at about the time of Christ's birth, and even made a few preliminary calculations to prove his case. The conjunction occurred in the sign Pisces, from time immemorial identified with the destinies of Israel. A conjunction in that sign always signified the rising of some mighty master of the Jewish race. Such a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurs once in about 800 years. It was, therefore, sufficiently extraordinary in Kepler's eyes to herald the birth of a Messiah.

Not until 1826 was Kepler's suggestion seriously considered by astronomers. In that year Professor Ideler, of Berlin, computed the positions of Jupiter and Saturn and proved that they were actually in conjunction in 7 B. C. His calculations showed that they at no time overlapped to form a single star, but that they were separated by a distance equal to the apparent diameter of the moon. Accordingly, Ideler had the temerity to suppose that the wise men saw the two planets as one star, because they were miraculously near-sighted. In justice to Ideler, it must be stated that he abandoned his theory when Encke, in 1831, repeated the calculations and found that the actual distance between Jupiter and Saturn, when nearest each other in B. C. 7, was more than the apparent diameter of the moon.

Apart from the fact that Jupiter and Saturn were never sufficiently near each other to be seen as one body, two planets in conjunction can hardly be called a star. Nor is it likely that experienced Chaldean astrologers would so regard it. Moreover, there were other planetary conjunctions at about the same time. Professor Stockwell has demonstrated that a conjunction of Venus and Mars occurred on May 8th, B. C. 6, about fifty days less than two years before Herod's death. Because the mandate for the

slaughter of the infants was issued some time before Herod's death, Professor Stockwell advances the supposition that this conjunction was the Star of Bethlehem. Since conjunctions occurred so frequently, it is difficult to understand why more of them did not call forth Chaldean or Persian deputations. Because of these fatal objections to any theory which regarded the Star of Bethlehem merely as a conjunction of two planets, the late Prof. R. A. Proctor cast about for other celestial phenomena and finally decided that the wise men might have been guided by a comet. There is much to be said in favor of the supposition. Comets are discovered nowadays at the rate of two or three a year. Not all of them are particularly brilliant; but it is not inconceivable that in Biblical times comets occasionally appeared that were brilliant enough to strike terror into superstitious hearts. Indeed, before Edmund Halley proved that the law of gravitation applied to the comet which bears his name and which has revisited the earth at intervals of seventy-one and one-half to seventy-nine years, comets were regarded as divine messengers, as omens of good or evil, and particularly as harbingers of pestilence and war. To a poetic eastern people who revered the stars as symbols especially set in the heavens for the guidance of men, comets were undoubtedly awesome visitors. The Chaldeans, Persians and Jews were astronomically no more enlightened than the mediæval Christians, and if at the fall of Constantinople in 1453 all Christendom was alarmed at the appearance of a comet (a comet which we now know to have been Halley's), it is highly probable that the Orient was no less impressed by these sudden visitations. Comprising, as it does, a nucleus, a "coma" or envelope surrounding the nucleus and measuring from twenty thousand to one million miles in diameter, and a long tail which streams behind the nucleus for sixty to a hundred million miles or more, a comet is one of the most mysteriously beautiful celestial apparitions that ever meets the eye. But whether or not the Star of Bethlehem really was such an apparition no one can affirm with certainty. An astronomer can merely state that the idea is not untenable and that it is less objectionable than the conjunction hypothesis.

Lastly, the theory has been proposed that the Star of Bethlehem was what is called a "new" star or "nova," a star which suddenly flares up in the heavens and fades away again to its former magnitude after the lapse of weeks or months. Such new stars are not altogether rare. Ten appeared between B. C. 134 and the end of the fifteenth century. Since the fifteenth century no less than sixteen have been recorded. In our own time they are discovered with fair frequency.

Even before the invention of the telescope such new stars were studied by astronomers.

Apart from the astronomical evidence in favor of the theory that the Star of Bethlehem was a nova, poetically, at least, it seems singularly fitting that a matchless orb blazing forth in sudden magnificence should have marked not only the birth of a Messiah whose destiny it was to save mankind by his own suffering and to make this a new world by purging it of evil, but also the birth of a new sun with embryonic planets wheeling about it in shining clouds of gas and stellar dust.

INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

By E. O. SELLERS, Director of Evening Department The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

LESSON FOR DECEMBER 22

FOR AND AGAINST HIM.

LESSON TEXT—Luke 9:45-52. GOLDEN TEXT—"He that is not against us is for us."—Luke 9:50.

This lesson naturally falls into three divisions: I. The mistaken seal of the disciples of Jesus, vv. 45-50; II. The intrepid seal of Jesus, vv. 51-56, and III. The lack of seal on the part of some would-be followers of Jesus, vv. 57-62.

Evidently monopolistic ideas are not a modern development. The desire to control all religious authority has given rise to the most damnable plots in the history of the Christian church. Christian intolerance is one of the devil's sweetest morsels.

"And John answered" not the impetuous Peter. Who it was that had spoken we do not know, but evidently it was Jesus. Two things are without dispute: (1) The unknown one was doing the work, and (2) he was giving Jesus the glory, Luke 10-17. Whether he ceased at the command of John we cannot say. It has been suggested that could we have heard the tone of John's voice perhaps we should have gathered that John was not quite sure he had done the right thing, but he is frank and tells Jesus why he gave his command, viz., "because he followed not with us."

Work in Christ's Name.

This spirit has always been one of the serious drawbacks in the advancement of the kingdom. Belong to our party, follow our methods, or else quit working. There are, of course, wrong methods which will never produce right results, but if a man is doing Christ's work and doing it in Christ's name we need to beware of allowing selfishness, the traditions of men, or the fact that "we never saw it on this wise" to allow us to hinder that man in his work, see Mark 9:39-41.

Scholars are divided as to the interval of time between verses 50 and 51, but the second section is a wonderful illumination of the sort of zeal Jesus desires in his followers. Verse 51 is one of the most sublime in the entire Bible. Where can we find anything like it? Jesus saw not the bickering of the disciples as to place and power; he saw not the slights cast upon him by both Jew and Samaritan; Jesus saw Jerusalem and beyond that Calvary, and as steadfast as a flint "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." All of redemption, all of Pentecost, all of "this age" and the glorious consummation of "this age" is bound up in that intrepid zeal of him who when "the days were well nigh come that he should be received up" set his face "steadfastly."

Certain of the Samaritans refused to receive him and his party. This time John has another to speak with him, James. They again show the spirit of intolerance and to it they add that of vindictiveness. As we go before him to prepare the way are we entirely free from making a similar mistake? These Samaritans acted in ignorance. Perhaps, as revealed in v. 53, they saw that he did not intend to go to their village anyway (see also John 4:40-42).

Stories of Three Men.

In the third section we have before us the stories of three men whom Jesus met, each of whom lacked sufficient seal to become his true followers. The first impulsively answers some emotion of his heart and assures Jesus that he will follow "whithersoever thou goest." Jesus did not rebuke him, for the man had but little realization of what was implied. "I'll go with him through the garden," we sing glibly. Let us pause and honestly answer the question, "Will I go?" "Am I willing to pay the price?" (John 15:20 and I. Peter 3:31.) He who had set his face steadfastly simply opened as it were the deep loneliness of his heart and gives this man a faint suggestion of that poverty of him "who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor" (3 Cor. 8:9). This is one of the few references Jesus made as to his own condition. The second man seems to be of more importance, inferentially, at least, for Jesus commands him to "follow." Notice Jesus does not say admire me, nor even worship me, but "follow me." This man seems to have a very high sense of duty, his obligation to his parents and to the amenities of society. This man's mistake was in placing anything, no matter how important, in the place of the kingdom. Jesus does not mean for us to neglect such a plain duty, but this man is pleading for a delay, and had it not been this excuse it would have been some other one.

The third man also had something he wanted to do first. He expressed great determination (v. 61), but like Lot's wife, he wanted one more look at the world he was going to leave. Christ's words are significant. Obey the prompting of your heart. Do not look backward to the world, but look forward to the kingdom. The only possibility of your running the race before you, of plowing a straight furrow, is like the Master to set your face "steadfastly." If we hang onto the world we are "none of his." If we hang on to him we must give up the world.

HE KNEW WHAT TO AVOID

If Knowing Human Nature Would Do It, This Man Would Have Made Good Preacher.

"Dr. John Haynes Holmes, who preached a Bull Moose sermon to President Taft the Sunday before election day, isn't like Washington White," said a member of Dr. Holmes' Church of the Messiah in New York. Washington White was an aged hod carrier. Laying down his paper one evening he said to his wife over his spectacles:

"Martha, I believe I'd make a preacher. Listen, now, and I'll give you a sermon."

"The old man then stood up to the table and belloved out a vigorous discourse on the wickedness of the idolaters of the Orient."

"His wife said at the end: 'A good enough sermon, Washington, but you've told us all about the sins of the foreigners, and never a word about the sins of the folks at home here.'"

"Ha, ha, ha, I understand preachin' too well for that," laughed the wily old man."

ITCHING AND BURNING

Iberia, Mo.—"I was troubled with scalp eczema for about five years and tried everything I heard of, but all of no avail. The doctors told me I would have to have my head shaved. Being a woman, I hated the idea of that. I was told by a friend that the Cuticura Remedies would do me good. This spring I purchased two boxes of Cuticura Ointment and one cake of Cuticura Soap. After using one box of Cuticura Ointment I considered the cure permanent, but continued to use it to make sure and used about one-half the other box. Now I am entirely well. I also used the Cuticura Soap."

"The disease began on the back of my head, taking the form of a ring worm, only more severe, rising to a thick, rough scale that would come off when soaked with oil or warm water, bringing a few hairs each time, but in a few days would form again, larger each time, and spreading until the entire back of the head was covered with the scale. This was accompanied by a terrible itching and burning sensation. Now my head is completely well and my hair growing nicely." (Signed) Mrs. Geo. F. Clark, Mar. 25, 1912.

Cuticura Soap and Ointment sold throughout the world. Sample of each free with 33-p. Skin Book. Address post-card "Cuticura, Dept. L, Boston." Adv.

Hopeless.

"Who wrote that story about Roosevelt's return to the Outlook office?" asked the managing editor.

"Billy Pennington," replied the city editor. "I thought it was a pretty good story."

"It was more than that. It was a remarkable story. I think we ought to raise Pennington's salary. He didn't wind up by saying: 'The colonel then plunged into a mass of correspondence.'"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that he did. I blue-penciled that part of it."

"Oh, pahaw! We'll never be able to make anything of that fellow."

Being a Diplomat.

"I am much bothered," he said, "can marry a wealthy widow woman I don't love, or a poor girl that I do love intensely. What shall I do?"

"Listen to your heart," advised his companion, "and marry the one you love."

"You are right, my friend. I shall marry the girl."

"Then can you give me the widow's address?"—London Opinion.

Misty Past.

"I am afraid," said Senator Soreg-hum, "that the altercation in which I have become involved must be more or less obscure to the casual listener."

"About all you have both said lately is 'You're another.'"

"Yes. And we have said it so often that I am afraid nobody remembers exactly what either of us was accused of being in the first place."

Good Reason.

"Mrs. Comcup is always boasting that her husband can take any man's measure."

"That's true. He used to be a tailor."

Defending Mother.

"Papa, mamma says that one-half the world doesn't know how the other half lives."

"Well, she shouldn't blame herself, dear, it isn't her fault."

Not Always.

"It is money makes the mare go." If she turns out a loser, it is the mare that makes the money go."

But a tip doesn't always come to the man who waits.

BUY FOLEY'S HONEY AND TAR COMPOUND Stops Coughs - Cures Colds

PARKER'S HAIR BALM

PISO'S REMEDY