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JOURNAL OF  
THE TRANSACTIONS

OF

The Victoria Institute,

OR,

Philosophical Society of Great Britain.

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VOL. LXIV.



LONDON :

Published by the Institute, 1, Central Buildings, Westminster, S.W.1.

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1932

758TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,  
HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL,  
WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY, MAY 2ND, 1932,

AT 4.30 P.M.

WILLIAM C. EDWARDS, ESQ., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed, and signed.

The CHAIRMAN then called on Lieut.-Col. F. A. Molony, O.B.E., to read his paper on "The Magi: Their Nationality and Object."

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*THE MAGI : THEIR NATIONALITY AND OBJECT.*

By LT.-COL. F. A. MOLONY, O.B.E.

THE story of the Magi is clearly relevant for consideration at the Victoria Institute, because the Bible and Science touch each other therein. The aim of the writer will be to show the credibility of the Biblical record, both from an historical and a scientific point of view.

The advisability of dealing with the subject arises from the fact that there have grown up round the story legends and ideas which present difficulties to many minds. Some of these ideas have been so often presented to our thoughts by hymns, pictures, nativity plays, etc., that they have become part of popular belief. But this is dangerous, and Article VI of the Church of England Prayer Book says "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, or may be proved thereby is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith." Though we never do require that these accretions should be believed by any man, yet many probably suppose that we do, and some may be kept from accepting the Faith thereby.

The Magi probably travelled from the East to Jerusalem more because of the expectation of a Judean Messiah, than because they saw a new star in the sky. This is the first point I wish to make.

Edersheim, in his *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, has a whole chapter on the Jewish expectation of a Messiah ; and an appendix, containing a list of 456 Old Testament passages which are Messianically applied in Rabbinic writings. Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius confirm the fact that the Jews were expecting a Deliverer when Christ came, the two former expressly declaring that this was based on certain passages in the old Jewish Scriptures.

The expectation of the Messiah can be abundantly illustrated from the New Testament. The deputation of the Pharisees to John the Baptist asked him if he was the Messiah. The woman of Samaria said " I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ, when He is come, He will tell us all things." St. Luke says that the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not. Later they said : " When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than these which this man hath done," and there are many other passages. This expectation accounts for the many false Christs who arose at, and soon after, the time of Christ.

There was a very large colony of devout Jews at Babylon, and the expectation of the Messiah was just as strong there as in Judea, and Babylon fulfils the condition of being east of Judea. There seems little reason to doubt that the approximate time when the Messiah was due to appear was deduced by the Jews from Daniel ix, 25—the prophecy of the 69 weeks. The word " weeks " signifies only septenaries, and may therefore be reasonably taken to mean weeks of years—that is 483 years. The period was to begin from the going forth of a commandment to restore and build Jerusalem, but four rather similar edicts had been issued.

\* \* \* \*

This matter has caused much controversy, and the proof that the date for Christ's coming was accurately foretold would involve us in a long historical argument. Let us put the matter thus—the Babylonian Jews must have been much interested in Daniel's prediction, for was not that prophet a Babylonian Jew himself ? and had not the edict probably emanated from Babylon ? Their history had taught them to be very sure that all God's promises would be fulfilled. In 5 B.C. it became clear that the first two possible dates for Christ's coming had failed, and only two remained. The third had to be dated from the decree granted to Ezra in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. Dean W.

Goode, in his Warburton Lecture of 1857, dates this as the close of 458 B.C. or beginning of 457, and we gather from Ezra vii, 8, that Col. A. G. Shortt agrees with the first date.

So, in 5 B.C., it became clear that there were about 30 years to run to complete the third period. If these Jews assumed that the Messiah would be about 30 years old before beginning His work, then their expectation of His birth would become very marked, and they naturally looked out for something to corroborate the prediction of Daniel or at least show them whether the third or the fourth date was the long-expected time. They found this corroboration in the appearance of a new star or comet, and therefore started for Judea to do homage to the Messiah of whose birth they were assured.

It is, of course, well known that the Chaldeans studied the stars very carefully. We call their wise men who did so, astrologers, but doubtless there were some among them who deserved to be classed as astronomers, and who sought to know the truth about the stars. There was a general belief that the appearance of a new star presaged the birth of a great man. This must have caused them to make maps of the stars. But any particular section of the southern sky could only be seen for a month or two each year, so probably they revised these sections annually, and thus were able to say with some certainty whether any particular star was new or not.

\*            \*            \*            \*

Were the Magi Jews who had some faith in Chaldean beliefs ? or were they Chaldeans who had studied the Jewish Scriptures and thus become interested in the expected Messiah ? Either explanation may be held. The stricter Jews denounced the idea that events could be told from stars. But when a belief is general among one's neighbours, most men begin to consider it as a possibility. What more natural, in 5 B.C., than that Babylonian Jews, expecting the Messiah's birth, should have gone to one of the best of the Chaldean astronomers to ask him if a new star had appeared of late ? Or what more natural than that a Chaldean astronomer, who knew of the great Messianic expectation among his neighbours, the Jews, and who saw a new bright star or comet, should wonder whether it were the Messiah's star ? He may have had his private doubts about the soundness of the Chaldean belief that new stars presaged the birth of great men, and have welcomed an opportunity for testing it.

Herein seems to lie the only dilemma connected with the story of the Magi. If they were Jews, how is it that they did not know of Micah's prediction that the Messiah was to be born at Bethlehem? If they were Gentiles, why should they take so much interest in the Jewish Messiah as to undertake the long journey to Jerusalem? But an answer can be found to both questions. The Jews had not the Old Testament prophetic writings all bound up together as we have, nor had they our aids for discovering what they say on any particular question. Chaldean Gentiles, living among Jews, may well have known of Isaiah's many favourable allusions to the Gentiles, and in particular of Isaiah xlii, 6, where the prophet writes of One who should be a light of the Gentiles. Indeed, we know that the expectation of a Deliverer and Enlightener was general throughout the Roman world at the time of Christ's birth.

Tradition makes these Magi to be Gentiles, usually kings, and makes their number three. It is well to remember that there is no Scripture warrant for these assumptions. It seems probable that kings would know something of Herod's jealous nature, and would fear to stir up his wrath. The number three is probably arrived at because they presented three classes of gifts. The Magi may have travelled from Persia, India, or even China, and artists love to show them as representing these three countries, but it seems much more probable that all were Babylonians.

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The identification of Christ's star would be of great importance if it would help us in fixing the date and time of year of Christ's birth. But it cannot do this, for we do not know what interval elapsed between the first actual appearance of the star and the arrival of the Magi at Jerusalem, nor how long the latter event was after the birth of Christ. Yet the matter has interested astronomers. Kepler pointed out that a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the constellation Pisces in the year 747 A.U.C., that is two years before the probable date of Christ's birth, and in the next year Mars joined this conjunction. This only comes about once in 800 years, and is generally admitted by astronomers. But Kepler, who observed this in 1603-4, also noticed, that when the three planets came into conjunction, a new, extraordinarily brilliant, and peculiarly coloured evanescent star was visible between Jupiter and Saturn, and he

suggested that a similar star had appeared under the same circumstances in the conjunction preceding the nativity.

Thus there is probability that Christ's star appeared in the constellation Pisces, which never rises high in the sky, and this agrees with Matt. ii, 9, implying as it does that the star was seen low down, close over Bethlehem.

If we assume the Magi to have travelled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in the early evening, as seems most likely, then the constellation Pisces would have stood over Bethlehem in the months of October and November. If the visit of the Magi was made in the autumn, then the birth of Christ took place probably in summer, and this agrees with the shepherds having been keeping watch in the open.

One of the Collects speaks of the star *leading* the Gentiles, and many hymns speak of its *guidance*. It would be well if preachers sometimes pointed out that the Bible knows nothing of this, except that, at the very last, the star may have indicated the exact house where the Holy Family were to be found. The Magi, during their long journey to Judea, must have travelled at various times of the night. If the star was always in front of them then, it would mean that it pursued a course in the heavens which even those who have only a smattering of astronomy must regard as incredible. Before they left Jerusalem, the Magi had decided to go to Bethlehem.

When they left Jerusalem we read: "Lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was."

This may be very simply explained as follows. Suppose that the route which they chose from Jerusalem to Bethlehem pointed, at first, 11 degrees to the left of Bethlehem, and gradually bent round towards that little town. And suppose that the star stood right in front of them when they started, and that they took 1½ hours to cover the 6 miles. Then, when they approached Bethlehem, the star, which of course kept moving to their right hand, would appear to be right over the town, and, as they descended into the depression north of Bethlehem, the star would seem to descend also and to stand close over the town. St. Matthew implies that they then saw it over the very house in which the Holy Family lived. Needless to say, it is unlikely that this was the inn. St. Joseph, being a skilled artisan, had probably moved into some premises where he could pursue his trade.

It may be asked, If you explain away the miraculous guidance of the star, what was St. Matthew's motive for relating the story? We do not eliminate miracle. The fact that the star first moved towards, and then appeared to stand over Bethlehem impressed the wise men. We may look upon it as a coincidence if so minded. But the number of such coincidences related in Scripture is, to say the least, very impressive. Then we have at least two coincident dreams, perhaps more, for it is reasonable to suppose that more than one of the Magi were warned that they must not return to Herod.

As to the question whether the star was sent by God or not, it would seem that St. Matthew leaves us free to believe what we think fit. Hence there is no need to raise any difficulty connected with the impropriety of Almighty God condescending to make use of false Chaldean beliefs. But as regards the dreams, we are distinctly told that both were sent by God.

It would seem that St. Matthew's motive in relating the story was this: He regarded the sojourn of the Holy Family in Egypt as an instance of the early history of Israel being repeated in the person of the Messiah. To account for the flight into Egypt he had to relate Herod's wicked plot; and to explain that truthfully it was necessary to tell the story of the Magi. Is it not remarkable that, in telling the story, he should have been kept from saying anything incredible by modern astronomers?

Herod the Great's conduct is, of course, entirely in accordance with all we know of that suspicious and cruel king. But why did he name such a long period as two years? We are told that he inquired of the wise men diligently what time the star appeared. If our conjecture is right, that they made plans of sections of the southern sky annually, what could they tell him? Only that they first noticed the star two or three months back (for we must allow time for preparation as well as for the long journey), and that it may have first appeared any time within the 12 previous months. Say 15 months in all. Herod was then very likely to say to his soldiers—"slay all under two years of age," to make sure that a boy unusually big for his age did not escape.

\* \* \* \*

We now come to consider the gifts which the Magi presented. Edersheim says: "Their offerings were evidently intended as specimens of the products of their country, and their presentation was, even as in our days, expressive of the homage of their country



to the new-found King." We note that Edersheim does not favour the popular idea that they came from different countries, and it certainly seems improbable. The learned author continues, "In this sense, then, the Magi may truly be regarded as the representatives of the Gentile World; and their homage as the first and typical acknowledgment of Christ by those who hitherto had been 'far off'; and their offerings as symbolic of the world's tribute.

"This deeper significance the ancient church has rightly apprehended, though, perhaps mistaking its grounds. Its symbolism, turning, like the convolvulus, around the Divine Plant, has traced in the gold the emblem of His Royalty; in the myrrh, of His Humanity, and that in the fullest evidence of it, in His burying; and, in the incense, that of His Divinity." And Edersheim adds in a footnote—"So not only in ancient hymns (by Sedulius, Juvenas and Claudian), but by the Fathers and later writers." See also No. 76 in "Hymns Ancient and Modern."

But if it can also be shown that the Magi may have had practical reasons for the gifts they chose to offer, then the credibility of the narrative is increased. Gold need not detain us. If a king is to do any good, he must have gold. If he wishes to benefit his people by the construction of roads or bridges, the workmen must be paid. The other two gifts may well have been chosen to convey a useful message from the Jews of Chaldea to the Jews of Palestine. They seem to have been designed to tell the Western Jews what their Eastern brethren gathered from the Scriptures about the expected Messiah. Frankincense was the most costly material used in the worship of God. To offer frankincense in a casket to the infant Messiah did not necessarily mean that they looked on Him as divine. Many passages in the Old Testament imply as much, but it seems clear that their meaning had not been appreciated by either East or West.

But it may well have meant that the Eastern Jews looked to the Messiah to lead and help them in their worship. If so, Christ certainly did not disappoint them. The Babylonian Jews probably knew that their Judean brethren were planning a rebellion against the Romans. They held that such a revolt was both needless and hopeless. For the Romans governed well for those days, and their good laws and good roads were great boons. Looked at from a distance their petty tyrannies sank into

insignificance ; their colossal strength showed in its due proportions.

The message of the incense thus was : Turn your thoughts from these vain hopes of independence from Rome. Our Jewish mission is to teach mankind to worship aright the true God. This will be the aim and work of our great Messiah. Follow our example and help Him in this.

And the reason for offering myrrh may have been that the Eastern Jews had assimilated the meaning of the 22nd Psalm and 53rd chapter of Isaiah, and knew that their Western brethren had failed to do so. Edersheim says : " It was a merciful Jewish practice to give to those led to execution a draught of strong wine mixed with myrrh, so as to deaden consciousness." The use of myrrh for mitigating suffering, was thus already well known. It was not only used for placing round a dead body as hymn 76 implies.

Hence the message of the myrrh was surely this : " Our prophets predict that the great Messiah will have to suffer grievously to fulfil His mission. When this happens, do not be scandalized or cease to believe that He is the Messiah. The story of Joseph, the Book of Job, the history of the prophets all show that Almighty God sometimes allows Satan to afflict the innocent. Suffering must not be taken as a proof of sin or even of shortcoming. If the Messiah leads a perfect life, do not argue that He must be a sinner because He suffers. Remember that the suffering was predicted, and must therefore be looked upon as a part of God's plan."

In summing up, we may surely say this. While the accretions which have grown round it are dangerous, the story of the Magi, as related in the New Testament, is fitting in every sense of the word. It fits into the Old Testament, and into all we know of the history, expectations and systems of thought of the time of Christ's birth. And in a higher sense, to those of us who believe in Christ's divinity, it seems fitting that one born to be the Saviour of mankind should receive homage from wise men who had journeyed from afar, as well as from the humble shepherds of the hills around Bethlehem.

#### DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN (Mr. W. C. Edwards), with a few remarks, moved that the thanks of the meeting be given to the lecturer for

his interesting and instructive paper, and the vote was passed with acclamation.

MR. G. WILSON HEATH said: I think we shall agree that the Magi were devout Jews, and not Gentiles. Probably they were Chaldean or Persian Jews, for many thousands of these had never returned to Palestine with Nehemiah and Ezra after the captivity. They must have studied the various prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, and among these that of Daniel (chap. ix). The impulse was so strong in them, that they had travelled, say, a thousand miles, bearing costly presents in order to do homage to their long-hoped-for King and Deliverer.

I question all we have heard about any astronomical combination occurring at that time. The movements of the earth in relation to the heavenly bodies would make them appear to move from east to west and not from north to south. Luke ii, 9, mentions "the glory of the Lord," which was the feature when the angels visited the shepherds on the night of the birth in Bethlehem. Possibly this was a kind of *Shekinah* glory similar to that which rested on the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and would be seen as coming down from heaven for a vast distance in an eastern sky. There is no indication that the Magi needed any star or other directing sign from heaven to direct their way to Jerusalem, the "Magi city of the great King." The route was a well-known "Highway." They reached the city, they told their story to Herod, they asked "Where is He," etc. Herod called in the scribes, and made careful inquisition both as to the *place*, and, from the Magi, the exact *time* when the star appeared. It was decided that Bethlehem Ephratah, a town less than six miles south of Jerusalem, was the town marked out by the Scriptures, and that the star, or heavenly light, appeared in the east some fifteen or eighteen months previously. The Magi were then sent by Herod to make full inquiries and to return and inform him. As they reached the outside of Jerusalem, they once again saw the miraculous light, but not in the south over Bethlehem, but in the north. They followed the light, and reached Nazareth, the native town of Joseph and Mary, some sixty miles north of Jerusalem, and there entered "the house" (Matt. ii, 11), not a "stable," and there they poured out

their worship and treasures on the child Jesus. Warned of God, they did not retrace their steps south to Herod and Jerusalem, but continued their journey back to their own land in the east.

To get the whole story and scene clearly before us, we must examine and combine both the story of the shepherds mentioned in Luke ii and that of the Magi in Matt. ii. Luke does not mention the Magi nor Matthew the shepherds. Matt. ii opens in the past tense—"Now Jesus having been born in Bethlehem"; then in the story of the Magi we are listening to something which happened some considerable time *after* the birth. The story in Luke of the shepherds concerns their visit *at* the birth. Luke tells us exactly when the holy family returned from their enforced visit to Bethlehem to their own town of Nazareth—Luke ii, 39, "*When they had accomplished all things according to the law of Moses they returned into Galilee into their own city Nazareth.*" The circumcising of the child and the purification of the mother would take, say, 33 or 41 days. During these days the shepherds made their visit. And some 18 months later the Magi were directed by the Glory light from heaven to Nazareth. No such miraculous directions would have been needed to visit the near-by village of Bethlehem. We must place the story of the Magi of Matt. ii, between verse 39 and 40 of Luke ii, and then all is clear and simple. The late Dr. A. T. Schofield held the views I have indicated, and taught the same in his lectures on the journeys of our Lord in Palestine. Dr. Bullinger and other expositors have indicated the same.

Col. SKINNER said: Col. Molony has given us a most interesting paper, and I am sorry to have to raise a discordant note. But, had these men been Jews, the strength, the intensity of Jewish nationality being what it was—for a Jew was a Jew, the world over, in those days, just as now—would not St. Matthew, the writer for the Jews—as we think of him—have recognized and referred to them as Jews, rather than vaguely as wise men from the East? Personally, I would like to think of these men as Jews earnestly longing for their Messiah, but the difficulty is a real one.

Bishop MOLONY, brother of the lecturer, followed with some remarks, in which he expressed the opinion that the star could not

have been an angel (as some speakers had suggested) as Scripture spoke definitely of a star, without any hint of angelic form.

Mr. AVARY H. FORBES said: I should like to ask if anything was known of the expectation of a "Messiah" outside the Jewish Church. I ask this, because of the so-called "Messianic Eclogue" of Virgil, written some 30 or 40 years before the birth of Christ, in which this heathen poet pictures a son of the gods being born on earth, to introduce a new and golden age of peace, prosperity and happiness among men.

Here are a few sentences from Virgil's Ode No. IV:—

"Now a new progeny is sent down from high heaven, the infant boy, under whom first the iron age shall cease, and the golden age over all the world arise. He shall partake the life of gods, and rule the peaceful world with his father's virtues . . . The serpent shall die, and the poisonous fallacious plant shall die . . . The Assyrian spikenard shall grow in every soil . . . All lands shall all things produce . . . Dear offspring of the gods, illustrious increase of Jove, set forward on thy way to signal honours, the time is now at hand . . . See how all things rejoice at the approach of this age. Oh that my last stage of life may continue so long, and so much breath as shall suffice to sing thy deeds. Begin, sweet babe, to distinguish thy mother by thy smiles. Begin, young boy, that child on whom parents never smiled nor God ever honoured with his table nor goddess with her bed."\*

I hardly expect an answer to my query, as I know that the source and meaning of this poem have always been, and still are, a great puzzle to classical scholars, whose expositions of it have been multitudinous and multiform. But if there was before our Lord's birth a widespread expectation among cultured heathen nations, as well as among the Jews, of a regenerator of the world, and the Divine Regenerator actually came soon after, does that not help to reinforce the expectation now so widespread throughout the Christian world of the coming again of that Divine Regenerator in the person of our Blessed Lord?

I may add that Pilate, brought up in Rome, surely knew of this Eclogue of Virgil, and when he heard that Christ claimed to be the

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\* Davidson, Trans. (Bohn).

*Son of God*, it flashed on him that this was the Divine Being predicted by Virgil. Pilate then became alarmed, and did his utmost to save Jesus from the Jews ; for if he (Pilate) should be guilty of putting to death a son of the gods, what should his own end be ?

#### WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Lieut.-Col. A. G. SHORTT wrote : I see Col. Molony considers the Wise Men (called in Greek *Magoi*) to be Jews from Babylon. The Magi were, according to Herodotus, a class or caste of the Medes. Some say that they were Scythians. They were in due course the priests of the Persians, and were widely known for their wisdom and magic as far as India. Borlase, in his *History of Cornwall*, expresses surprise at the close similarity between their doctrines and practices and those of the British Druids. Would it not be more probable that during the Persian domination of Babylonia they would absorb the astronomical wisdom of the Chaldeans, and retain their records ? It seems doubtful whether any Jews would be called by the name of a people so widely known.

Also the remnant of Babylon were transported to Seleucia *en bloc*, in 275 B.C. Sacrifices, however, are said to have been still held there a century or so later, but by the time of the Nativity, many years after the Babylonian priesthood had found a refuge in Pergamos, had the city not become "heaps" ? Has Col. Molony any information on this point ? The Nativity star is assumed to have been a new, or temporary, one. For my own part, I am inclined to think that this is not the case, but I would suggest that we shall get nearer a solution if we regard it as an entirely open question, and keep both views to the front, until further evidence is available.

Rev. J. J. B. COLES wrote : We are indebted to Lieut.-Col. Molony for calling our attention to the accretions which have greatly interfered with the true understanding of the story of the Magi. I will add a few thoughts which may be helpful to Bible students. The Royal pedigree in Matt. i begins with Abraham the *Hebrew*. The antithesis between Jew and Gentile is not introduced into Holy Scripture until long after Abraham's day. There is nothing, of

course, of this question of Jew and Gentile in the revelation which was given by God's holy prophets during the 2,500 years before the written Scripture began.

The Patriarchs mapped out the constellations in the heavens, and especially the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac. The Magi knew that the promised Redeemer was the principal subject of this primitive revelation, and that He would be of the tribe of Judah. "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion—canst thou bring forth the Mazzaroth (the Twelve Signs) in their season? Was not Joseph's dream of the 'Sun, Moon and Eleven Stars' making obeisance to him (his own star being the twelfth) connected with this primitive revelation?"

The Magi knew of the wisdom of the stars. What of the banners of the Twelve Tribes in the Wilderness? Why introduce the question of Jew and Gentile into the dramatic story of the Magi? Let us read this true romance of Holy Scripture without any accretion. As to Bethlehem or Nazareth, would not the present of gold be useful for the journey and for the expenses while in Egypt? Why then any necessity for returning to Nazareth before proceeding *via* Hebron?

#### LECTURER'S REPLY.

Mr. Wilson Heath advocates the theory that the interview between the Holy Family and the Magi took place at Nazareth and not Bethlehem. This is new to me. I do not think that Luke ii, 39, compels us to believe that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth immediately after the Presentation. If so, there would surely have been very little danger from Herod.

Taking into account the point which Col. Skinner brings forward, the best explanation would seem to be that the Magi were Gentiles who had heard from Jews of the Messianic expectation.

Mr. Avary Forbes' extract from Virgil is very interesting, but I cannot add anything further on his question. In answer to Lieut.-Col. Shortt's question, Dr. Lukyn Williams tells me that there were plenty of Jews in Babylon in Christ's time.