

REFLECTIONS ON A RECENT DISPUTE¹

The more claim an idea has to be considered living, the more various will be its aspects.

(Newman, *Development*, 2, 1, 1)

“Today’s newspaper lights tomorrow’s fire”. The correspondence column is no stable pillar of truth. In such a hall of debate, if we may take but one drawback, the last word wins ; so it won in the quarrels of childhood when silence spelt defeat. Memories are short and early arguments quickly forgotten : what is new is true. Unhappily the very reason that forbids debate itself demands it : the first thrust of a written word, if it is not to be adjudged mortal, compels riposte. So it begins, and so it goes on until an editor at some prudent or imprudent time knocks down the rapiers. But there is gain, too. Opinions that otherwise would never meet have been confronted squarely. Now this is already good ; but it is not the end, it is only the beginning—or should be. It has made way for assessment, for cool review. At the meanest we may learn something of tactical wisdom or folly ; but we may go further—we may even discover what the fight was really about. Some quarrels, and this we speak of was one of them, are symptoms of deeper antagonism. And indeed if we pursue the quest of this profound difference we may find our own mind—a discovery of some importance.

This is not the place to appraise the dramatic quality of the play that brought down a bolt of protest and a rain of letters. Nor do we intend to question policy : that it wounded many, that it brought an ideal low (some would say “an idea”, but the damage remains) is beside our present point. Nor do we blame the playwright. He could not be expected to know, as so many of us are surprised to know, that the perpetual virginity of Mary was stoutly defended by the earliest “Reformers”. In a matter of this kind even the most conscientious of dramatists would naturally take his lead from those of his own persuasion (to use the conciliatory jargon). He might go to Cadoux’s popular *Life of Jesus* in the Pelican series (p. 34). He might go further—and higher—to Vincent Taylor’s excellent commentary on Saint Mark’s Gospel (1952) ; he would find the same answer in both. I quote Taylor (p. 249) :

There can be little doubt that the Helvidian view (i.e. that Mary had other children) stands as the simplest and most natural explanation of the references to the brothers of Jesus in the Gospels.

¹ Last Easter Sunday and again during the following week British Television presented a play called *Family Portrait*. It assumed that our Lady had other children than the One.

Cadoux comes to the same conclusion "with some hesitation". These are only two, but it would not be rash to say that in this they represent the bulk of non-Catholic Scripture scholarship.

The letters of Catholic objectors quite justly called attention to the word ἀδελφός. It was repeatedly and correctly pointed out that the translation "brother", though generously maintained in the Catholic versions, is of doubtful accuracy.¹ The argument was based not so much on the Greek (which has its own word for "cousin") as on the Aramaic that lies behind the Greek word.² The appeal was not unreasonable. The first Gospel-use of the term in connexion with our Lord is found in Mk. III.31, and Taylor says of this passage: "Long before Mark incorporated it in his Gospel the narrative was current and gained its form in oral tradition". We are pointed back, therefore, if not to the Aramaic language itself at least to an Aramaic background. Hesitation, then, is justified. And the Catholic is not alone in his caution: in a recent Swiss Protestant publication a contributor (who is also the editor) writes:

With the problem of deciding whether or not Mary had other children the New Testament is not concerned. . . . It does not hesitate to speak of the brothers and sisters of the Lord but without specifying whether they were children of Joseph by a previous marriage or whether they were cousins—an opinion which is exegetically defensible by reason of the elasticity of relationship terms in the Jewish world.³

On this point discussion has reached saturation, but perhaps we may be allowed to recall two passages of *Mark* which can scarcely be absolved from the debate. The villagers of Nazareth are reported: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses?" (VI.3). And, in the same Gospel, those standing by the Cross include "Mary the mother of James and Joses" (XV.40). Of this second passage Taylor remarks: "Mark would not have designated Mary the Virgin in this roundabout manner". He is therefore obliged, since he has adopted the Helvidian view, to distinguish the pair of brothers in chapter 6 from the pair in chapter 15. The distinction is of course possible but we may be excused for sensing a *tour de force*.

But here is a warning that may be timely: the charge that Scripture disproves the perpetual virginity of Mary was so heartily answered that readers of the correspondence may have been led to think that Scripture, I mean Scripture as a lonely letter, was held to prove it

¹ But who can measure its psychological impact on even the most detached scholars?

² There is no need to add to the instances so often cited of the use of *ah* (Heb.), *aha'* (Aram.) or, in the Septuagint, of ἀδελφός; cf. examples in Lagrange, *Ev. selonc S. Marc*, p. 80.

³ J.-J. von Allmen, *Vocabulaire Biblique* (Neuchatel 1954), p. 197.

positively. Now this, as we hope to show, is no necessary part of the Catholic claim, a fact that should be made clear for the sake not less of others than of ourselves. It is true that if our Lady's "I know not man" (Lk. I.34) implies a vow of virginity, we have the beginning of a positive argument from explicit Scripture—but to demonstrate this implication seems difficult to some and, to many others, impossible. Be that as it may, we should do well to remember that the argument from the wide possibility of the term ἀδελφός is a negative one only. In any case, that blood brothers are not mentioned does not prove they did not exist, and even if they did not exist (may it be said with reverence) we have still to prove perpetual virginity. It is vital to the Catholic position that Scripture should not contradict dogma ; it is not part of that position to maintain that the private exegete, left to his own interpretative resources, can deduce from Scripture the dogma's positive demonstration. Hence, as Lagrange noted many years ago : "Theologians do not exaggerate the significance of the Scriptural *data* because, as they uniformly recognise, the perpetual virginity of Mary is a dogma based rather on Tradition than on Scripture".¹

It would prolong or frustrate this article to enter into the evidence from early tradition. It is enough to note in passing that Hegeppus, writing between A.D. 174 and 189, makes it sufficiently clear that James—who, if any, was blood brother of the Lord—was in fact the Lord's cousin ; that Clement of Alexandria was asserting in A.D. 200 that James was son of Joseph and not of Mary ; that Origen, who in 203 succeeded Clement as headmaster in Alexandria, wrote with regard to Mk. III.31 : "I consider it fitting that Jesus should have among men the firstfruits of chaste purity that Mary had among women". One recalls these testimonies with a very modest purpose : merely to warn the opponents of Mary's virginity that the mention of a few names will not suffice ("Tertullian, Helvidius, Bonosus and Jovinianus and others" ; Taylor, p. 248). Tertullian (c. A.D. 220) had an axe to grind and was no "man of the Church", as Jerome pointed out ; Helvidius does not speak until one hundred and sixty years later. The serious scholar will certainly not be impressed by the two names from the end of the fourth century : Bonosus, the rather obscure heretic and later schismatic, was condemned for this very opinion by his contemporaries ; Jovinianus, an ex-monk of wild immoral habit, cuts a poor figure in a gallery of witnesses. "And others" is rather too anonymous for discussion. But we repeat that we are content to defend on this ground where we could reasonably mount an attack.

¹ M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon S. Marc* (1929), p. 86.

Indeed we might have foregone even the defence were not Cadoux's *Life of Jesus* in so many hands :

The Catholic idea is (he writes) that because Mary was the Saviour's mother it would have been unseemly for Joseph to have had intercourse with her after Jesus' birth or for her to have borne more children. . . . This is but another example of making doctrinal fitness do duty for historical evidence and it is of no authority whatever. It is not suggested by anything in Scripture.¹

What does the author mean when he speaks of "doctrinal fitness doing duty for historical evidence"? After all, we have seen some of the historical evidence and—for what historical evidence is worth in a case of this kind—it is more impressive for the doctrine than the corresponding "evidence" against it. As for "doctrinal fitness", it is true that Origen has adduced this very reason—among others—but could his ideal, however appealing, have stood against the known facts and against clearly decisive texts from the Scriptures? Or is it not possible that the facts as known to him in A.D. 203 bade him seek the fitness of the facts? In any case, let us at least insist that this despised "doctrinal fitness" argument be barred not to one side only but to both. We, for our part, have equal right to refuse the proffered argument of Taylor: "The fact that Jesus had blood brothers and sisters, it may be held, underlines the reality and completeness of the Incarnation". But, to be plain, this argument does not attain the stature even of "doctrinal fitness". Do we need subsequent births to prove that a first was "real and complete"?

Catholics have said all these things a thousand times and still the opposition is not silenced. Why? Because it rejects the known truth? This answer is facile, uncharitable and improbable. Because of latent ethical bias? No doubt this plays its part. But the answer is to be sought at a deeper level. We differ precisely as Protestant and Catholic must differ, not on some single point of exegesis, nor on one or two dogmas however important; we differ on our very approach to the Word of God.

This profound difference lies beneath the surface quarrel about our Lady's perpetual virginity. We may lay our finger on it if we consult the *Church Times* for 18 August 1950. The impending definition of the dogma of the Assumption drew the following declaration from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. The statement is admirably clear :

¹ C. J. Cadoux, *The Life of Jesus* (Pelican 1948), p. 34. "Suggested in Scripture" is not in any case satisfactory evidence for the author. The virginal conception of our Lord is more than "suggested", but he denies it on the ground that "the Lucan story bristles with historical improbabilities".

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There is not the smallest evidence in the Scripture or in the teaching of the early Church of belief in the doctrine of her bodily assumption. The Church of England refuses to regard as requisite for saving faith any doctrines or opinions which are not *plainly* contained in the Scriptures.

In quoting this statement we are not wandering from our subject, for singular as the doctrine of the Assumption may at first appear in that our historical sources take us back only to the seventh century, yet it differs only in degree from our present case, the perpetual virginity, which is traceable only to the third century and was not formally defined until the seventh.¹ And we have called attention to the word “plainly” because, had it been omitted, a Catholic might have let the sentence stand (*cf.* footnote 1, p. 18).

Does the Bull *Munificentissimus* flatly contradict the whole of the statement from York and Canterbury? It does not. It draws no immediate argument from an explicit text of Scripture,² nor does it claim to find the doctrine in the works of the most ancient Fathers. Instead it takes two explicit *data* of the New Testament, the divine motherhood and our Lord’s virginal conception, and upon these foundations builds the doctrine of the Assumption. The argument does not suppose for a moment that the doctrine is “plainly” contained in the sense intended by the statement made on behalf of the Church of England—that is to say in the sense that the individual exegete could demonstrate the doctrine by using the rational tools of his trade. Of the above quotation it is therefore the second sentence with its significant adverb to which the whole Catholic outlook is opposed. The sentence rejects the Catholic conception of the controlled internal development of doctrine, of the *fecunda veritatis auctoritas*.

We shall not be misunderstood, it is hoped, if we here register satisfaction that the gap between Catholics and others is now so clearly marked. Clear statement goes with true charity; there is nothing to be gained by vagueness, nothing to be built in a mist.

One might fear the reaction of Protestants (one wrote on this occasion). . . . Their very “scandal” shows us that it was not useless to make proclamation of our faith. The growing precision of Mary-dogma reveals the gap between us, no doubt, but it does not create the gap. If people could enter the Church without believing in the Assumption of the Virgin and all that truth implies, it would be the beginning of a doctrinal crisis which would eventually erupt. Unity is never achieved or sustained by misunderstanding.³

The Council of Trent declared that the Church receives with equal veneration the sacred books and the apostolic traditions since both are

¹ *cf.* the Lateran Council of 649 (DB. 256; and c. DB. 993).

² The phrase used in the Bull is: “. . . *Sacris Litteris tamquam ultimo fundamento nituntur*”.

³ *Revue Thomiste* (1950), 2, 266 f.

expressions of the living Gospel, of the living Word which is the life-principle of the Christian and Apostolic Society. Now these two forms of expression in which the one Word of God makes itself heard, I mean the canonical books and the apostolic traditions, may be quantitatively complementary—one may speak where the other is silent. Whether this is in fact the case is open to discussion and is argued among Catholic theologians. But in any case all would be prepared to admit that the traditions are most often concerned not with adding to the content of the Writings but with clarifying, synthesising, applying that content.¹ If we are not to mislead the non-Catholic, therefore, it might be better to avoid the common formula: “the two sources of Revelation”. Scripture and the apostolic traditions² are not two independent absolutes: they interpenetrate and explain the one the other. With this in mind Newman wrote:

I am not aware that later post-Tridentine writers deny that the whole Catholic faith may be proved from Scripture, though they would certainly maintain that it is not to be found on the surface of it, nor in such sense that it may be gained from Scripture without the aid of Tradition.³

For Sacred Scripture, inspired as it is, of its nature is a fixed form with the shortcomings inherent in every fixture, but the Word of God of which Scripture is one expression is dynamic and actual. We cannot call the “plain” sense of Scripture the end of God’s continuous self-revealing process. Indeed, Man will never reach the end, for the Beatific Vision itself is an eternal progress endlessly astounding the blessed with new discovery. In this life too the fixed canonical utterance strives for further articulation. The eternal Word demands repeated actualisations appropriate to this or that human time while itself remaining the same.

The Protestant position, at least as it found expression in the Amsterdam Conference of 1948, leaves room for the development of the Word:

¹ The origin and practical purpose of the written Gospels (*aides-mémoire* of the early Christian preacher) and the incidental character of St Paul’s surviving epistles might at first thought suggest that “there are many things which are not written in this book” but which survive in the traditions. On the other hand, “given the variety of the sacred writings which touch on so many religious themes, it is to say the least unlikely that any essential point of the divine message should have gone completely unmentioned” (*Initiation Théologique*, I, 81). We might add that even the decision on the canonical catalogue may be considered only as an explication of the apostolic commission recorded in the Scriptures—if we remember that “apostolicity of origin” seems to have been the earliest criterion of canonicity.

² By “apostolic traditions” we do not mean necessarily the passing on of formulæ and facts absent from written Scripture. The phrase implies the shape of the Church’s living (Sacraments, moral practice and the like) outlined already in the apostolic age.

³ *Development*, 7, I, 3, 4.

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The Protestant puts the emphasis upon the freedom of the Holy Spirit, upon God's repeatedly renewed initiatives by which, through his Word, he supervises, corrects, maintains, renews and cherishes his Church.¹

A Catholic would not repudiate this view but, for him, the divine "initiatives" are canalised through God's instituted Society by which also they are verified.² "Bible and Bible only" is capable therefore of being a misleading formula for describing the non-Catholic bodies. They, too, demand what we may call the Biblical Complement, but whereas for the Catholic the emphasis is upon its continuous and collective conveyance through the instituted Church, the Protestant envisages the Word conveyed sporadically and, as it were, immediately and individually. The choice of the neutral is, to use Barthian terms, between the Institution and the Event, between Catholic corporate Tradition and individual Inspiration, between the Apostolic succession and a new series of Prophets. Despite this fundamental difference it is nevertheless interesting to our subject that, if our judgment is correct, the principle of development is admitted in Continental Protestantism ; that the "plain" meaning of Scripture is capable of expansion.

We have said that the written Word, though a continual point of reference, is not the final goal. St Paul's own scrutiny and exposition of the "deposit" shows that when he urged Timothy to keep it he was not thinking of gold in a chest but of a plant in soil. Even Paul's was an effort to express in the terms of his day and circumstances the powerful new divine reality which could exhaust that vocabulary and leave infinitely more to be said. For it is true that the New Testament itself, undeviating compass though it is, sets no limit to our way. "The nature of the New Testament is entirely misunderstood if we lose sight of its true character which is one of effort towards the perfect expression of a new truth (i.e. of the revelation of God in the flesh), of the movement of thought towards a peak, a thought which, as day succeeds day, demands more precise expression".³

It is this movement of thought, this effort towards complete synthesis, that the Church must continue from century to century, and each Christian within the Church. It is true that revelation in its entirety was given in the apostolic age, but it was given—as the divine pedagogy dictated—in order to be made more explicit, to achieve formulation and synthesis in the Church and by the Church. The Church, indeed, declining the false compliment offered her by Modernism, refuses to be regarded as a factory of new dogmas ; and

¹ cf. *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* (1952), p. 684.

² This is not to deny God's initiatives in the isolated soul of the non-Catholic of good faith who thus belongs "unknowingly, initially, tendentially to the Church".

³ J. Lévic, S.J., *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1949), p. 1008.

yet she could never tolerate an attitude like Tyrell's: "If you can live on the undeveloped germ you may dispense with developments, especially if they but puzzle and hinder you".¹

A practical corollary follows to which Père Lévié calls attention in the article just quoted. He expresses surprise at the ease with which certain exegetes and theologians declare this or that theological doctrine "formally taught in the Scriptures". And all too often the private exegete is expected to demonstrate with arguments sought from syntax and context the elaborated doctrine of the twentieth century, as if the inspired writers had not used the idiom of their own time. In other words, the Catholic exegete is asked to turn uncompromisingly Protestant, to defend a position he indignantly repudiates and make mere logic fecundate the textual ovum. Now the true state of the case is that the Church's consciousness of the Word within her has become progressively sharper: the Spirit has been and is doing its work. What the Church did not perceive the day before yesterday she perceived yesterday. This consciousness, not blind and creative but objectively analytic, increasingly penetrates the committed Word. And this Word is not abstract to be thought, but vital to be lived: so for example the Word of the Cross grows daily more articulate as the Church repeatedly represents, re-presents, sacramentally assimilates the crucified Word.

The Church's knowledge of the Word, then, is not merely equal to the sum of the Biblical scholarship of twenty centuries. It vastly exceeds it, or rather transcends it because it is of another sort. The equation Logic *plus* Text *equals* Theology is quite inadequate in the Catholic view because it leaves out the *Spiritus suggeret omnia* (Jn XIV.26) that was not idly spoken. The God-given synthesis does not violate logic but neither is it limited by logic; and that is why, even granted that in fact all necessary truths are to be found in the Scriptures, Driedo could say more than four hundred years ago that not every heresy can be confuted from Sacred Scripture.² Thus, for we must take an example, a scholar may accept the authenticity and immediate implication of the Petrine texts and yet feel uncompelled by historical or logical argument to deduce the Papal prerogative.³ His attitude is not dishonest; it remains "reasonable" so long as he puts no faith in the living Tradition. "He who does not accept this faith will easily find exegetical and historical difficulties which legitimate his refusal; he who accepts it does not do so without assurance as complete as human knowledge is capable of furnishing".⁴ The Petrine texts

¹ *A Much-Abused Letter*, p. 86.

² *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* (1950), p. 44.

³ So O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Eng. ed. 1953).

⁴ cf. Review of the above by Benoit, *Revue Biblique* (1953), pp. 565-79.

provide a basis, a foundation, suggesting the outlines of the building, but to appreciate their full significance it is necessary not only to have seen the building but to have lived in it. The Tradition, in this case the legitimately emerged and emerging form of Church government, must be lived if the Word which it interprets is to be known. And that is the answer to the frequently recurring problem of the non-Catholic scholar's refusal of Catholic Biblical interpretations.

The term "inspired" has become almost a monopoly of the Sacred Books. This is possibly unfortunate. It is true that the Scriptures are "the excelling, inspired and essential expression of the Faith"; nevertheless we must beware of a narrow and inexact idea of Inspiration. "Inspiration is in fact a rich charisma of which Scriptural Inspiration is only one, and not the highest, kind. Beside it, and superior to it are Prophetic and Apostolic Inspiration—charismas directed not to writing down the revelation but to its budding forth in the richness of its first oral formation and to the many-sided development of the revelation in a living community chosen by God to elaborate and transmit the Word".¹ This is what Newman meant by "the Prophetic Tradition existing primarily in the bosom of the Church herself" or "pervading the Church like an atmosphere".²

Now this "Inspiration" or this "Tradition" is not to be conceived only, though this it is also, as a check or brake upon religious thought and practice. It is a positive driving force. Hence, as Père Benoit notes, it is a mistake to describe even Infallibility as a negative charisma preserving from error. On the contrary, it is a positive charisma which makes the Church better perceive and declare in the course of time the truth implicitly contained in the apostolic rule of faith. To this remark we may add, since it is connected with it, that dogmatic definition is not to be viewed as unhappy necessity compelled by heresy and grudgingly accepted by the Church at large. What heresy stimulated the definition of the Assumption? The Church is not a nervous mistress of exegesis, fearful lest the texts break in her hands. She is no Rabbi hedging the Letter about. She claims the Spirit of Christ who "spoke as one having authority" and in that Spirit she finds not survival only but exuberant life.

What precisely does this Spirit confer in the order of the Church's knowledge? It is a matter of experience that the higher intelligence tends to arrive at the unity behind plurality, to achieve the faculty of seeing many things in one idea. Now though they had received the totality of Truth (which is the *Mysterium Christi*) the Apostles did not

¹ *Revue Biblique* (1955), 258-64.

² *Development*, 2, 2, 2.

live to see the refraction of that ray through the prism of time which was to give the Church opportunity to live the revealed Word by sacrament and devotional thought. Diversity grew from the primitive unity because the revelation accorded in its fulness to the Apostles was not a series of theological propositions but a concrete perception of the fact of Christ, of the total reality of redemptive work.¹ Rather it is not so much that multiplicity has grown from unity as that the unique has been, is being, more deeply sounded. In the higher synthesis which is the fruit of the Spirit and not the conclusion of syllogistic process the Church sees, but does not forge, the link between text and dogma, dogma and further dogma.

So for the Mary-doctrine, glory of our age. The virginal conception, the divine motherhood, Immaculate Conception, bodily Assumption and amongst these Mary's perpetual virginity—all are an extension of the *Mysterium Christi*. The statement must seem extravagant to those who demand logical and historical demonstration, though it is salutary for all to remember how the adoption of the title *Theotokos* in the fifth century secured for ever a right faith in the manhood of the eternal Son. The Catholic, who believes that the Church's intuition is of the promised Spirit, knows that the privileges of Mary are the outworks of the central fortress which is Christ. And indeed it is historical fact, as Newman notes, that the early heresies though opposite to each other all tended remarkably to her exaltation. The Catholic theologian does not apologise for this great Maryward thrust; he welcomes it not for its own sake alone but because it illustrates the specifically Catholic principle we have described: that Scripture is formally insufficient.

The responsibility of supplying for this insufficiency is assumed by, because it was committed to, the Society of Christ which we call the Church. We have tried to show that it must be assumed by someone, and the charge is not yet answered that the Reformation merely set up one infallibility in place of another: the infallibility of the Book (which means of the scholar or of isolated *illuminés* so often at variance) for an infallible Church. The individual conservative Protestant pastor and his liberal neighbour, each takes upon himself the responsibility for his flock and freely decides if his interpretation of the Word is correct or not. But the Catholic declines to commit himself to an irresponsible individualism. Before his eyes it is the corporate Church that expands the Word. And she, notably in our age, boldly displays the privileges of Mary. They are founded indeed upon the great Scriptural *datum* of the virginal motherhood and not contradicted by rational interpretation of the written Word, but they are discerned in

¹ H. de Lubac, *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses* (1948), p. 155.

THE THREE KINGS

their separateness, like rolling hills as the dawn brightens, only by the light of her Spirit. In her the Word grows. She is the soil.

Sermo currat et clarificetur.

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THE THREE KINGS

(Mt. II. I-12)

One could sometimes wish for the simple faith of a child, which takes the story of the Three Kings quite normally and naturally, and is not disturbed by the questions which occur to the mind of the inquiring student. What about these names Caspar, Melchior and Baltassar? Were there only three of them? Were they kings? Where did they come from? What exactly was the star? Did it really lead them to Bethlehem? How did they know what it meant? . . . The child is quite content with his picture of camels and crowns, pageboys and guiding star. It is only the inquiring student who will find that there is hardly anything in the text to answer his questions for him, and that all he can do in most cases is to make a good guess.

The names, anyway, date only from the ninth century A.D. and are nothing but a guess. And so too is the number, deduced probably from the number of the gifts they brought, although in fact the oldest pictures of the episode make the number anything from two to twelve. Even less can be said for their promotion to royalty, and there seems little point in making up our own occupation for them when St Matthew has told us they were, quite simply, "magi". Although the word originally denoted a sect of Persian priests, it had come by New Testament times to mean "astrologer", and was understood as such by the first commentators of St Matthew's Gospel. Simon "Magus" followed the same profession, and our own derived word "magician" still bears witness to that meaning. Does this shock us, that we should not be dealing with holy wise men at all but with fortune-tellers, star-gazers who thought that horoscopes were written in the skies? Yet God had used odder material still in the Old Testament to lead men to himself.

About their country of origin we are on surer ground. To us the "East" suggests Persia, India or China. But to get to these countries from Palestine you have to start by going northwards, and they were reckoned as the North. In the Bible the East is Transjordan and Arabia, and it is there that we must place our magi. The "star" offers