

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

Mohammedan Paradise, no Indian isle of bliss. Unless perfect holiness have charms to captivate our hearts, we know of no heaven Christianity has to tempt us with.

In short then, if men *will* have the world at all hazards; if, whatever it may cost, they are determined to join in the hot strife with men however unprincipled, for secular wealth, honors and distinctions; we say to such, we can indeed point out to you no road to certain success; you may be overreached and defeated after all your efforts, and the prize when obtained may vanish of itself or be wrested from your grasp. But, on the whole, as the world is, your shortest and surest way is to be ready to abandon principles, debase your characters, sear your consciences, sacrifice your peace and destroy your souls. But, as you value your highest happiness here or hereafter, enter not the lists in such a contest. Let the world have its own. Let Machiavelli be right. Let worldly men pursue a low object by base means; the means are naturally fitted to the end. Let us not wish to deny, let us not envy their success. But let us seek for the approbation of a good conscience, for that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord."

---

## ARTICLE VII.

### THE TRUE DATE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH.

Translated from *Wieseler, Chronologische Synopse der vier Evangelien*. Hamburg, 1843.  
By Rev. George E. Day, Marlborough, Mass.

[The computation of time from the Christian era, universally adopted since the eighth century among Christian nations, is based upon the calculation of the year of Christ's birth, made in the sixth century by Dionysius Exiguus a Roman monk of Scythian extraction. That this calculation is incorrect, is now generally admitted. The church fathers had only an uncertain tradition and differed among themselves. In modern times, Pearson and Hug, have placed the birth of Christ one year before our era; Scaliger, agreeing with Eusebius, two years; Calvisius Vogel, Paulus, and Süsskind, agreeing with Jerome, three; Bengel and Anger, with Wieseler and the common view, four; Usher and Petavius, five; Sanclemente and Ideler, seven.

The present essay, in addition to comprising the results of the

latest investigations on this question, is farther valuable as a thorough examination of the credibility of two prominent events recorded in the gospels in connection with the birth of Jesus, both of which have been disputed, viz. the star in the east, and the census under Augustus near the time of Christ's birth. The former, Prof. Norton (*Evidences of the genuineness of the Gospels*, Vol. I. Notes, p. lix.) does not hesitate to call "a fiction," and even grounds his rejection of the first two chapters in Matthew, in part, on their containing what he calls such "a strange mixture of astrology and miracle" as "we find represented in the story of the Magi." Even supposing the star to have been an extraordinary meteor, it is difficult to perceive the force of this objection, unless indeed we first assume that the birth of Christ was a far less important event than the world has been accustomed to regard it. But if the ground maintained by Wieseler, in this essay in respect to the star in the east, is correct, not only are the objections of Prof. N. stripped of the semblance of plausibility, but the narrative itself, confirmed by undeniable astronomical facts, becomes a remarkable witness in favor of the genuineness of the two chapters, which it is cited by Prof. N. to impeach.

It is only necessary to add that the author of the following essay is a native of Altencelle in the kingdom of Hanover, where he was born, Feb. 28, 1813. In 1836, he was appointed Repe- tent in Theology; in 1839, Privatdocent; and in 1842, Professor extraordinarius, in the University of Göttingen. The two other works by which he is known to the public are an examination of the genuineness of Mark 16: 9—20 and John xxi,<sup>1</sup> and a treatise on the Apocryphical literature of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> —Tr.]

For the sake of more certain progress, we propose to treat, in the first place, of the *year* in which Jesus was born, and then, to inquire whether anything can be definitely decided in respect to the *month* and *day*.

Our first inquiry, then, is: "In what *year* was Jesus born?"

<sup>1</sup> Num loci Mr. 16: 9—20, et Jo. 21, genuini sint nec ne indagatur eo fine, ut aditus ad histor. apparitionum J. Ch. rite conscribendam aperiat. Götting. 1839, 8vo.

<sup>2</sup> *Auslegung und Kritik der apokalypt. Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, I Beitr. die 70 Wochen des Proph. Daniel. Nebst einer hist.-krit. Untersuchung über den Sinn, etc., der Worte Jesu von s. Parusie in den Evang. Götting. 1839.

The first year of our customary reckoning of time from the birth of Christ, or the Dionysian era, agrees with the year 754 U. C., according to the reckoning of Varro,<sup>1</sup> or 4714, Per. Jul. Dionysius himself, as Ideler, after Sanclemente, has shown, in his *Manual of Chronology*, II. 383, (to whose instructive discussion of our question I beg leave to refer the reader,) placed the birth of Jesus near the close of the year 754 U. C. Of more recent writers, even Hase,<sup>2</sup> despairing of the credibility of the gospel narrative, agrees with the Dionysian reckoning. With this exception, the conviction of the erroneousness of this computation, is at present nearly universal. Let us review the grounds of its rejection, and inquire whether a better one may not be substituted.

In our Gospels, we have *four data*, on which our investigation must rest, viz.; *first*, the reign of king Herod, (Matt. 2: 1, comp. Luke 1: 5,) the father of Archelaus, (Matt. 2: 22); *secondly*, the appearance of the star of the wise men, and their arrival in Jerusalem, (Matt. 2: 2, 7, 16); *thirdly*, the census in Judea, under Augustus, (Luke 2: 1); and *fourthly*, the thirty years of age, at which Jesus entered upon the Messianic office, (Luke 3: 23.) Only the first, third and fourth of these data were *designed* to possess a chronological character, and thus in this respect also Luke appears more distinctly chronological. According to the degree, in which these four data lead to *one* and the same result, must its value be estimated. Should it be supported by a whole chronological system with which the gospel narrative harmonizes, its truth would hardly be doubted.

FIRST DATUM. *Christ was born during the reign of Herod the Great.* Matt. 2: 1—22. Luke 1: 5. But how long did Herod reign and when did he die? The historian Josephus, to whom, as by birth a Jew, special authority on this point belongs, informs us (Antiq. 17, 8. 1, de bell. Jud. 1, 33. 8,) that Herod died in the thirty-seventh year after the time, when by Roman influence (through Antony and Octavius, by virtue of a decree of the Senate) he was appointed king, and in the thirty-fourth year after the death of Antigonus, or the commencement of his actual reign. This appointment, which is mentioned in the Antiq. 14, 14. 5, falls,

<sup>1</sup> We reckon here and throughout this Article from the foundation of Rome, in order to have a fixed standard *different* from the year of Christ's birth, and by which the latter may be measured. The year of Rome (U. C.) can be easily changed into the erroneous but current year of the Dionysian era.

<sup>2</sup> See his *Leben Jesu*, 3te Aufl. S. 49 sq., where the works on this question are cited.

two chronological data, the 184th Olympiad and the consulate of Cn. Domitius Calvinus II and C. Asinius Pollio, there given, in the year 714 U. C. With this agrees the third datum, that Herod, by the joint action of Antony and Octavius, though at the instance, especially, of the former, was elevated to the throne; for the reconciliation of these two men took place immediately upon the death of the imperious Fulvia, i. e. according to Dio 48. 28, in the beginning of the year 714 U. C. In accordance with this, the death of Antigonus, and the storming of Jerusalem by Herod and the Romans, falls, according to Ant. 14. 16. 4, in the year 717<sup>1</sup> U. C., in the *third*<sup>2</sup> month (Sivan), i. e. June or July, as Josephus expressly declares. Upon these data, most chronologists, at the present day, correctly place the death of Herod in the beginning of the year 750 U. C., and only a few, as Paulus, continue to assign the year 751. In fixing upon the latter period, it has not unfrequently been overlooked, that Josephus, in accordance with the chronological principle laid down in the Talmud,<sup>3</sup> reck-

<sup>1</sup> Dio 49. 22, incorrectly places the storming of Jerusalem in the consulate of Claudius and Norbanus, or 716 U. C. Comp. Ideler, Handb. d. Chronol. II. 380, and Anger, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The passage reads thus: *ὑκατέβοντος ἐν Τρώμῃ Μάρκου Ἀγρίππα καὶ Καννίνου Γάλλου, ἐπὶ τῆς πεμπτῆς καὶ ὑδοηκοστῆς καὶ ἑκατοστῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος, τὸ τριτὸν μῆνι, τῇ ἑορτῇ τῆς νηστείας, ὥσπερ ἐκ περιτροπῆς τῆς γενομένης ἐπὶ Πομπηίου τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις συμφορᾶς — καὶ γὰρ ὑπ' ἐκείνου τῇ αὐτῇ ἔλυσαν ἡμέρᾳ — μετὰ ἑτη εἰκοσι καὶ ἑπτὰ.* Anger, however, p. 191 sq., differs in respect to the month, and places the storming of Jerusalem on the tenth of Tishri. His reasons are: (1) Antigonus is said in Ant. 20. 10, to have reigned in all, three years and three months. But since, according to Ant. 14. 13. 10, he commenced reigning shortly after Pentecost, 714, his reign must have extended longer than to Sivan, 717. This argument, however, is nothing but a mistake in respect to the principle on which the reign of the Jewish kings was calculated, of which more presently. According to this principle, Antigonus, even if he began to reign at Pentecost, 714, had reigned three years up to Nisan 717. Consequently, three years and three months would exactly bring us to the third month, (Sivan,) 717. (2) The expression *ἑορτῇ τῆς νηστείας*, Anger thinks, can only be understood of the fast-day, properly so called, the day of atonement or the 10th of Tishri. But here, we reply, is express mention made of a fast-day which fell in the *third* month, i. e. of a fast-day in Sivan and not in Tishri. Probably this fast was in commemoration of the suspension of the daily sacrifices in the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, in *Sivan*, 168 B. C., which continued till the 25th of Kisleu, 165 B. C., and constituted the three and a half years in Daniel 9: 27. 12: 7, 11. Comp. 11: 31. [The last sentence is the substance of the latter part of a long and unessential note.—T.B.]

<sup>3</sup> Gemara bab. tract. השנה c. 1. fol. 3. p. 1. ed. Amstelod. אין מניין להם למלכים אלא אלו מניין, "Non numerant in regibus nisi a Nisano, וְאֵין מניין להם למלכי ישראל." dixit R. Chasda: hoc non docent nisi de

ons the years of the Jewish princes from Nisan to Nisan, and in such a manner, that a single day before and after that point is reckoned as a full year. Let us cite a few instances. One instance we have already seen in the three years and three months of Antigonus, in the note in Ant. 14, 16. 4. A second still more striking occurs in the same passage; where Jerusalem is said to have been taken by Herod on the same day on which, twenty-seven years before, it was taken by Pompey. Now the first of these events took place in the year 691 U. C., and the last in the year 717 U. C. Consequently between these two data, according to the ordinary mode of reckoning, there would be only an interval of twenty-six years, and Josephus would have given exactly *one year* too much. But if we reckon according to the principle laid down by the Talmudists, we obtain exactly this one year; for then, the time of the taking of Jerusalem from Sivan 691 to Nisan 692, would be equal to one year, and the time from Nisan to Sivan 717, would be again equal to one year, and these two added together, would make *two years* of a period which, in the ordinary manner of reckoning, would only be one year. Again, Josephus, Ant. 20, 10, reckons from the beginning of the reign of Herod to the destruction of the temple under Titus, i. e. from Sivan 717 to the 10th of Ab, 823, one hundred and seven years. According to the usual mode of reckoning, it is only one hundred and six years and one or two months; and if with Anger we place the beginning of Herod's reign on the 10th of Tishri, it is not even one hundred and six full years. But not to weary the reader with further examples, those already adduced will be sufficient to establish the general principle in respect to the true mode of computing the length of the reign of Herod and his immediate successors, and also to clear up, I trust, the difficulties in this part of Josephus' Chronology.

Let us now turn back to the chronological data, derived from Ant. 17, 8. 1, in respect to the death of Herod. Thirty-four years after the storming of Jerusalem in Sivan, 717 U. C., brings us, since the thirty-third year ends before the first of Nisan, 750, only to the beginning of Nisan in this year. We obtain the same result from the other computation, thirty-seven years after his appointment, in

regibus Israelitarum. Ibid. fol. 2. p. 2, יוסף ראש השנה למלכות ויום אחד, "Nisan initium anni regibus: ac dies quidem unus in anno instar anni computatur." Ibid. בסוף שנה חשיב שנה, "unus dies in anni fine pro anno numeratur." Comp. Anger, p. 9, who has not recognized, however, this mode of computation in Josephus.

714 U. C., to the throne, which could not have been made earlier at farthest than the first of Nisan, 714, on account of the parallel calculation of time mentioned above, the *terminus a quo* of which we can fix at the month Sivan.

A confirmation of this is afforded us by computing the duration of the reigns of Herod, Antipas and Archelaus, the sons and immediate successors of Herod the Great. The former, as Noris<sup>1</sup> has shown, was exiled by Caligula to Lyons, (comp. *Jos. Ant.* 18, 7. 2,) towards the autumn of 792 U. C., in the forty-third year of his reign.<sup>2</sup> The forty-third year of his reign commenced on the first of Nisan, 792 U. C.; subtracting from this the remaining forty-two years, we obtain the year 750, and at most not farther than to the first of Nisan. Archelaus, according to *Dio* 55, 27, was banished by Augustus to Vienne, in the consulship of M. Emilius Lepidus and L. Arruntius, or the year 759 U. C., and as we learn from *Josephus*, *Ant.* 17, 13. 2, comp. *Vita* 1, in the tenth, or as he elsewhere says in relating the dream of the nine full ears, (*de bell. Jud.* 2, 7. 3,) in the ninth year of his reign, i. e. after he had reigned nine years and somewhat over. The nine years extend from the first of Nisan, 750, to the first of Nisan, 759 U. C., and we obtain ten years, if he was banished after the first of Nisan, 759.<sup>3</sup> All these data lead to the conclusion, that Herod the Great must have died not earlier than the first of Nisan, 750, and not later than the first of Nisan, 751.

Within these two limits, however, the time of Herod's death may be still more definitely settled. Immediately after the death of Herod, occurred the Passover on the 15th of Nisan, (*Antiq.* 17, 9. 3,) between which two events the seven days' mourning appointed for his father by Archelaus intervened, (*Ant.* 17, 8. 4, *de bell. Jud.* 2, 1.) Consequently the death of Herod would fall not far from seven days before the Passover in 750, and thus

<sup>1</sup> *Epist. ad P. Ant. Pagium de nummis Herodis*, *Ant. Opp.* tom. II. pp. 646—665.

<sup>2</sup> We have three coins still existing, with the inscription, ΗΡΩΔΗΣ ΤΕΤΡΑΡΧΗΣ Λ. ΜΓ, struck therefore in the forty-third year of his reign. Vaillant and Galland claim to have seen another coin with the date ΜΔ, but the existence of such a coin is justly doubted; comp. *Eckhel doctr. numorum vet.* III. pp. 486—489 *Sanclement. de vulg. aeræ emendatione*, III. 1.

<sup>3</sup> With this accords the statement of *Josephus*, *Ant.* 18, 2. 1, that the census of Quirinus was taken in the 37th year after the battle of Actium. For since this, according to *Dio* 51, 1 and 50, 10, was fought on the 2d of Sept., 723 U. C., (31 B. C.,) the thirty-seventh year after that began with the 2d of Sept. 759.

in the first eight days of Nisan, 750<sup>1</sup> U. C. This computation receives a remarkable confirmation from the fact mentioned by Josephus, that an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before his death, Ant. 17, 6. 4. It has been shown by Ideler and Wurm<sup>2</sup> that such an eclipse of the moon, visible at Jerusalem, actually took place at that time, on the night of the 12th and the morning of the 13th of March, commencing, according to Ideler's calculation, at 1h. 48' and ending at 4h. 12'. The visible full-moon in Nisan, or the 15th of Nisan, occurred in the year 750 U. C. on the 12th of April.<sup>3</sup> If, therefore, Herod died about seven days earlier, or within the earliest days in April, it would well harmonize with the date of the lunar eclipse. But, since all these data prove that Herod died in the early part of Nisan, 750, *Jesus, because born during his reign, must have been born before Nisan, 750, and consequently the Dionysian era is at least four years too late.* This is also the view now prevalent among chronologists. Anger, however, and a few others, believe that beyond this the time must remain undetermined.

SECOND DATUM. *The star of the wise men mentioned in Matthew, 2: 1—22.* This affords ground for more definite calculation. It is true, indeed, that the philosophers' star has not unfrequently been brought into the same category with the philosophers' stone. It is clear, however, that such a suspicion, so far at least as it has no better foundation than the presumption, in advance, of the historical incredibility of the evangelical narrative, should not prevent our investigating the possibility of rendering this star subservient to the purpose of chronological inquiry.

First of all, the question arises, whether the narrative allows or obliges us to conceive of an actual star, or a group of actual

<sup>1</sup> Some chronologists, as Usher (Annales vet. et nov. Test. ad ann. IV, a. Ch. p. 570,) Noris, S. 654, and others, relying upon the apocryphal statement in the tract. מלך חזקיהו, place the death of Herod on the 25th of November. Comp. on the other hand Ideler, Handb. II. 393, and Anger, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> In order to obtain an astronomical datum raised above all doubt, Wurm has taken the praise-worthy trouble, to calculate all the lunar eclipses from the year 6 to 1 B. C., and in Bengel's Archiv, Bd. 2. S. 54, has given the result in a table. It appears in respect to the years 750 and 751, which alone came into account in calculating the date of Herod's death, that in 750 only *one* eclipse of the moon *visible* in Jerusalem occurred,—that above mentioned; and in 751 none at all. The nearest preceding lunar eclipse visible in Jerusalem, occurred on the 15th of Sept., 749. Another splendid confirmation of the fact that Herod must have died not far from Easter, 750.

<sup>3</sup> Comp. Piper, de externa vitæ Jesu chronologia recte constituenda. Gött. 1835. 4to. p. 26.

stars; for, only upon this presumption, can its appearance be subjected to astronomical calculation. If, as many assume, it was an extraordinary meteor, created for a transient period, or if the whole story is a myth, this were impossible. Now, that we are obliged to conceive of a star, properly so called, and of course embraced within the limits of astronomy, is evident from the following reasons: *First*, the persons who first saw the star and perceived its import, were Magi, that is, according to the then prevalent meaning of the word, astronomers or astrologers by profession. Why *Magi*, and why are they so expressly designated by this and no other name, if the phenomenon were one which any *ordinary observer* could notice as well as they? *Secondly*, there is not a word in the passage which intimates that the *ἀστὴρ* mentioned, was or was thought to be a miraculous appearance. What right, then, have we to presume it? Besides, if this were a supernatural star, would it not have been recorded by the Evangelist, with great distinctness, since a miracle like this finds no parallel in the New Testament. *Thirdly*, supposing this to have been a miraculous phenomenon, an extraordinary illumination of the Magi would have been still necessary, before they could have recognized it as betokening first a birth, and then the birth of the Jewish Messiah. Of such an illumination, there is no intimation in the passage. Herod appears to have been alarmed only at the appearance of the star *at that time*. Of the necessity of its connection with the birth of the Messiah, he expresses not the least doubt, (Matt. 2: 2, 3). *Fourthly*, on the other hand, the whole description of the star, obliges us to conceive of an ordinary star. Such is the purport of *ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ*, (v. 2 and 9,) whether with Ideler we refer to the *East* and the eastern sky,<sup>1</sup> or what is more probable, to the *rising* of the star, for which *ἀναστῆλαι* is the usual word. Further, the *προάγειν*, (v. 9.)

<sup>1</sup> Ideler who understands by the star a constellation of Jupiter and Saturn, supposes the word *ἀνατολή* to refer to their first conjunction, which occurred in the east. As we hold the same view in respect to the constellation, there is really no necessity upon us to raise any objection. But the passage in Matthew hardly supports, we apprehend, this explanation. For what connection would the fact that the Magi had "seen the star in the eastern sky," have with the question, "where is he that is born king of the Jews?" On the other hand, the *rising* (*ἀνατολή*) of the star, in the view of astrologers, stood in undeniable connection with the birth of the Messiah. The mention of that *ἀνατολή* may also, perhaps, explain the inquiry of Herod in respect to the time *τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρος*, the answer to which would depend of course upon the knowledge of the Magi in respect to this point.

i. e. the motion of the star in the sky, in the direction towards Bethlehem, to which place the Magi were then going, and the *εἴρηαι*<sup>1</sup> over a region or a place, agree with this. That it was an ordinary star, is also supported by the fact, that it not only appeared to the Magi, in their own country, (v. 2.) but also at a later period, when they were going to Bethlehem, (v. 9.) and according to v. 16,<sup>2</sup> even two years later than when it first appeared to them. Finally, we gain a more distinct account of the star from the phrase in v. 2. It is the star of the Messiah, (ὁ ἀστὴρ αὐτοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως τ. Ἰουδ.), and since the Magi believed it to indicate his *birth*, they must have regarded it in an *astrological* light. The destiny of individuals, it is well known, was thought to be decided by the position and course of the *actual* stars, at the time of their nativity.

On these grounds, there appear satisfactory reasons for believing, that we are both authorized and obliged by the account in Matthew, to regard the appearance of the star, mentioned by him, as a means of ascertaining the year in which Jesus was born.

Let us now inquire, whether the expectations entertained in regard to the Messiah, or the history of Astrology do not enable

<sup>1</sup> In like manner Josephus says, de bell. Jud. 6, 5, 3, ἔπερ τὴν πόλιν ἀστρὸν ἔστη βρομφαία παραλήσιον, without thereby intending to affirm that the star stood fixed over the city.

<sup>2</sup> Strange to say, this v. 16—ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω—has led men of learning, not a few, (Lardner, the credibility of the gospel history; Münster, Stern der Weisen, and others,) to the opinion, that Christ was at least *two years* old in the life-time of Herod, and therefore must have been born at least two years before Herod's death. To this, it has been justly replied, that the reason assigned for the murder of the children of two years and under, in Bethlehem, by Herod, is not the time of *Christ's birth*, which Herod could not know, but the time which he had learned by inquiry of the Magi, i. e. according to v. 7, the time *at which the star appeared*. Comp. Anger, p. 10. Consequently the bloody decree of Herod followed about two years after the appearance of the star. But since this decree, according to v. 16, comp. v. 12, followed close upon the return of the Magi homewards, the star must have appeared to them also after the period of about two years. I may remark in passing, that the narrative thus understood, becomes at once disembarassed of the objection made to its credibility on the ground, that the massacre of two-years-old children is improbable, because it would be too cruel and altogether superfluous, and because Herod would naturally have been satisfied with the death of the new-born infant. Just the reverse. For if he brought the appearance of the star, which took place two years before, into astrological connection with the birth of the Messiah, he must have caused precisely the two-years-old children to have been slain first of all, in order to make sure of the destruction of the Messianic child.

us to decide upon something more definite in regard to the nature of the star. The Magi immediately gave an account of the star they had seen, it appears, to Herod (v. 2, 3), and he conversed with them privately (*λάθρα*) upon the date of the star's appearance (v. 7), and gave them certain commissions in reference to the new-born Messiah. Still, the idea of a star, significant of the birth of the Jewish king, appears not to have proceeded originally from the Magi, but to have been already a part of the popular faith. For not only do they speak of the star of the Messiah, as of a thing well known and universally expected—"we have seen his star in the East"—and the hearers make no farther inquiry in respect to its connection with the birth of the Messiah, but *at Jerusalem*, i. e. even if hyperbolically used, a large part of Jerusalem, was thrown into excitement equally with Herod, by this declaration of the Magi, and of course must have believed in the significancy of the celestial phenomenon. In admitting, as we must admit, that the Christology of that age expected the appearance of a star as the sign of the Messiah's birth, we do no violence to the historical character of the narrative; for this expectation, in an age so much devoted to astrology as that, is not only in the highest degree natural, but may also be proved from other historical facts. Winer in the labored and thorough article on the star of the wise men, in his *Bibl. Realwört.* remarks: "That according to the astrological faith of the ancient world, extraordinary events, especially the birth and death of distinguished, or exalted men, was indicated by heavenly bodies, particularly comets, and by constellations, is well known: comp. *Lucan.* 1, 529. *Suet. Caes.* 85. *Senec. Nat. Q.* 1, 1. *Joseph. bell. Jud.* 6, 5. 3. *Serv. ad Virg. Ecl.* 9, 47. *Justin.* 37, 2. *Lamprid. Alex. Sev.* 12. That the Jews also connected a celestial phenomenon with the birth of their Messiah, both the astrological tendency of the age and the passage in *Num.* 24: 17 ("there shall come a Star out of Jacob") early regarded as Messianic, scarcely permit us to doubt. The belief in the star of the Messiah, receives its earliest historical confirmation, however, for the period after Christ from the *B. Sohar* and *Pesita Sotarta*; comp. *Berthold Christ* p. 55 sq." Besides the passage in *Matthew*, and the translation of the passage *Num.* 24: 17 in the *Targum* (of *Onkelos*), may be cited as the most ancient concurrent testimony, the passage from the *Testament XII Patriarchum*,<sup>1</sup> test. *Levi*, 18: *καὶ ἀνατελεῖ ἄστρον ἀν-*

<sup>1</sup> *The Testament of the twelve patriarchs* was written about A. D. 100. *Comp. Wieseler, Zur Auslegung und Kritik* S. 226, and especially S. 229, Note b. The tendency of that age to associate the destiny of men with the course

ε ο υ̅ ἐν οὐρανῷ ὡς βασιλείας, φωτίζον φῶς γνῶσεως κ. ε. λ., and the appearance of the Pseudo-Messiah in the time of Hadrian, who, with reference to that passage in Numbers, assumed the name כּבֶּן כּוֹכָבִים (Son of the Star),<sup>1</sup> and on this very account found such a decided obedience on the part of the Jews, who imagined that in him the ancient prophecy of Balaam was fulfilled. Late embellishments, entirely fabulous, of the star mentioned in Matthew, occur in the apocryphal gospels, and in some of the church fathers; of these, Philo, Cod. Apocr. I 390, has given a learned account. The expectation of a star of the Messiah, must hence be assumed as having already formed a part of the faith of the Jewish nation. Even the mythic view cannot deny it, because in that case, it would be stripped of every means of accounting for the origin of the gospel narrative.<sup>2</sup>

The merit of having first made the star, mentioned in Matthew, regarded in an astronomical and chronological view, the corner stone of his investigations in respect to the year of Christ's birth, belongs to the celebrated astronomer Kepler. Although violently opposed by his contemporaries, Röslin and Cabrisius, he published several writings upon this subject.<sup>3</sup> The chronological impor-

---

of the stars appears in the effort to define the limits of human development according to strictly corresponding chronological cycles.

<sup>1</sup> Comp. Münter, der jüdische Krieg unter den Kaisern Trajan und Hadrian. 1821. After all my inquiries, I have not been able to discover a notice of the date of Barkochba's birth. I deem it probable, since even the celebrated Rabbi Akiba declared in his favor, and his specific Messianic character was designated by the name Son of the star, explanatory of the passage in Numbers, that his birth was distinguished by the appearance of a starry body, the knowledge of which would serve to illustrate and confirm the narrative in Matthew. If I might venture a conjecture, from the analogy of our Messianic star, he must have been born in 847 U. C. or A. D. 94, which would correspond very well with the year of his Pseudo-Messiahship.

<sup>2</sup> Comp. Strauss, das Leben Jesu 2te Aufl. S. 288 sq., where however for reasons easily to be seen, he notes no definite distinction between the gospel narrative and the later traditions, in respect to the nature of the star.

<sup>3</sup> The most important of these are: De Jesu Christi Servatoris Nostri vero anno natalitio. Franc. 1606. 4to; and De vero anno, quo aeternus dei filius humanam naturam in utero benedictae virginis Mariae assumpsit. Ibid. 1614, 4to. Comp. the treatise now rarely to be met with, giving the history of the controversy, in which Kepler was decidedly superior to all his opponents, entitled: Wiederholter Ausführlicher Teutscher Bericht, das unser Herr und Hailand Jesus Christus nit nuhr ein Jahr vor dem Anfang unserer heutigen Tags gebrauchigen Jahrzahl geboren sei; wie D. Helisaeus Röslinus—fürgibt; auch nit nuhr zwey Jahr, wie Scaliger und Calvisius Chronologi mit vilen

tance of Kepler's views, after having been long forgotten, was again first<sup>1</sup> pointed out by the learned Danish bishop M $\ddot{u}$ nter, and in consequence of this, the theory has been adopted and carried still farther by the modern astronomers, Pfaff,<sup>2</sup> Schubert<sup>3</sup>, Ideler and Encke. While theologians, in the age of Kepler were warmly debating the year of Christ's birth, there appeared towards the end of the year 1603 a phenomenon in the starry heavens, which led this celebrated astronomer also into the ranks of the combatants. In that year, on the 17th of December, a conjunction of the two planets Jupiter and Saturn occurred. In March 1604, Mars approached and in the autumn a new fixed star, which stood in the vicinity of those two planets in the eastern foot of Serpentarius,<sup>4</sup> and which, though at first a star of the first magnitude and shining very brightly, gradually faded, till in October 1605 it was hardly to be seen, and finally in March 1606 it entirely disappeared.

Aware that astrologers at all times, and therefore no doubt the Magi of Matthew, attached great importance to the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, which occurs in about every twenty years, and on that account had even divided the Zodiac, through which the former completes its course in nearly 800 years, into four trigons,<sup>5</sup> the learned Kepler was led to inquire whether such a conjunction might not have occurred shortly before the beginning of the Dionysian era, and thus afford a basis for an historical calculation in respect to the birth of Jesus. He attained the remarkable result, that this conjunction actually occurred three times in the year 747 U. C., in the last half of Pisces near Aries, while in the spring of the next year, the planet

---

alten Kirchen Scribenten darfür halten, sondern fünf gantzer Jahr . . . Gestalt durch Johan Keplern. Strassburg, 1613, 4to.

<sup>1</sup> In a program of the year 1821; later and more particularly in the work already cited: *der Stern der Weisen*. Kopenh. 1827, 8vo.

<sup>2</sup> *Das Licht und die Weltgegenden* Sammt einer Abhandlung über Planeten-Conjunctionem und den Stern der drei Weisen. Bamberg, 1821. S. 166 sq.

<sup>3</sup> *Vermischte Schriften*. Bd. 1. S. 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Comp. Kepler, De Nova Stella in pede Serpentarii*. 1606, 4to.

<sup>5</sup> The following are the four trigons:

Aries, Leo, Sagittarius,  
Taurus, Virgo, Capricornus,  
Gemini, Libra, Aquarius,  
Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces.

The first is called the igneous, the second the terraqueous, the third the aerial, the fourth the aqueous. *Comp. J. W. Pfaff, Astrologie*. Nürnberg. 1816. S. 119.

Mars was added, and he explained the star, therefore, which the Magi from the east saw at the birth of Christ, as identical with the conjunction<sup>1</sup> of these three superior planets, to which an extraordinary star, like the new star in his own age in the foot of Serpentarius, might possibly have been added. The birth of Jesus, however, he placed in the year 748 U. C.

Ideler, pursuing still further the theory of Kepler, has given us two calculations of the conjunctions of these planets, in his Manual of Chronology (Handb. d. Chronol. II. 406, 407) and in his textbook of Chronology (Lehrb. d. Chronol. 428, 429), of which the last, and according to Encke, the most accurate, gives the following results in respect to the three planetary conjunctions: viz. the first occurred on the 29th of May in the 21° of Pisces, (before sun-rise the planets in the eastern sky were visible, and Jupiter and Saturn were only one degree apart from each other); the second, on the 1st of October in the 18° of Pisces; and the third, on the 5th of December in the 16° of Pisces. The birth of Jesus is accordingly placed by Ideler in the year 747 U. C., as Sanclemente on other grounds, which Ideler approves of, had done before him.

These, however, cannot be regarded as valid, partly because they are irreconcilable with the two chronological data we have still to consider, and partly because they are at variance with the narrative in the gospel. For as we have seen, in the note on p. 174, the Magi did not go to Bethlehem till *two years after* the time at which they first saw the star of the Messiah. The supposition that Jesus was *born* two years *before* their arrival, though not impossible in itself, is expressly excluded by the narrative. The entire representation of Matthew leaves the impression, that the Magi arrived at Bethlehem shortly after his birth, especially v. 1, *τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος ἰδοῦ—παρεγένοντο*; comp. v. 10. Bethlehem also is represented in Matthew, as only the temporary place of residence of the parents of Jesus, not as their usual dwelling-place. If, therefore, the arrival of the Magi was almost

<sup>1</sup> The objection has been made that in Matthew only a single star (*ἀστὴρ*), not a group of stars (*ἀστρον*) is mentioned. To this it has been replied by Ideler, that the interchange of *ἀστὴρ* and *ἀστρον* is not uncommon elsewhere, (see the proof in Münter, S. 19 sq.); besides, popular writings are the last in which such an interchange should be objected to, as Neander and Winer have pointed out. Besides, the expected star of the Messiah is expressly called *ἀστρον*, e. g. in the Septuagint translation of Num. 24: 17, and in the Testam. XII. Patriarch, comp. the passage already cited, pp. 175, 6.

coincident with the birth<sup>1</sup> of Jesus, and not till two years after the appearance of the star, it follows, since the star appeared in the year 747 U. C., that Jesus was born two years later, that is, not earlier than some time in the course of the year 749 U. C., or if with Kepler, we date from the conjunction of Mars in the spring of 748, not later than the beginning of the year 750.

The astrological significancy of the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, and that too, in *Pisces*, as it occurred in the year 747 U. C. derives a remarkable confirmation from a passage of the learned Rabbi Abarbanel,<sup>2</sup> (in his commentary on Daniel, entitled *מַעְיָרֵי הַיַּיִן*, Fountains of Salvation, p. 83. Amst. 1647, 4to). All the changes of the sublunar world, he says, depend, in the opinion of those versed in the stars, upon the variable positions of the planets. The most important of all was when Jupiter and Saturn come into conjunction. He there speaks of the trigons mentioned above, and the different periods of the conjunctions supposed to exert more or less influence upon mundane events. In what part of the Zodiac the most potent conjunction occurs, can only be decided by experience. None has been more important than that which occurred in *Pisces*, in the year of the creation 2365, three years before the birth of Moses. After endeavoring to show on five cabbalistic grounds, that *Pisces* is the proper constellation<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since the star in Numbers could have been understood in a literal sense only in consequence of a decided leaning towards astrology, the hopes excited by the star in the east, cannot be regarded as the fulfilment of prophecy. That star derived its importance from the belief of the Jews of that age, not from its testimony to the Messiahship of Jesus. [Supposing it to have been a natural phenomenon, it was historically important as the occasion of Herod's attempt to murder Jesus and the flight into Egypt, besides the effect it may have had to excite public expectation in respect to the coming of the Messiah. On any view, there are reasons enough to keep us from calling it an idle story.—Tr.] Had Matthew regarded the appearance of the star as the fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy, he would hardly have omitted to mention it *expressly* in accordance with his well known custom, 1: 23. 2: 6, 15, 23, etc.

<sup>2</sup> I quote from Ideler, *Handb.* 11. 409 sq., and Münter, p. 55, because no copy of this work of Abarbanel is at hand. Abarbanel, according to Bartolocci, *Biblioth. Rabbin.* III 874, 875, was born in Lisbon in the year 1437, and died in Venice in the year 1508. This work he wrote in Apulia in 1497. Rabbi Chasdai of Alexandria, who lived in the last half of the 11th century, has also, according to Münter, S. 41, 42, connected the appearance of the Messiah with astrological observations.

<sup>3</sup> These five grounds are given in full in Münter S. 58.—If *Pisces* was the proper constellation of the Israelites, we can understand why the Magi, even if not Jews or associated with Jews, and even if altogether ignorant of the general belief of that age, that a great king would arise in Judea, should, in

of the Israelites, he gives a sketch of the principal events in history, in connection with the place of every conjunction. In conclusion, he says: "A short time since, (A. M. 5224 or A. D. 1463,) one of the most potent conjunctions of these two planets again occurred in Pisces, and it is not to be doubted that it resembled that seen at the time of Moses, and was a precursor of the birth of the divine man, the Messiah."<sup>1</sup> With this evidence in favor of the correctness of the view, originally proposed by Kepler, in respect to the star of the wise men, I should deem it strange if it were entirely without foundation; and still more strange, that in that case it should harmonize so well with the other calculations of the birth of Jesus.

Assuming this view then to be correct, Jesus must have been born, in accordance with what has already been observed, not in 747 or 748, but in 749 or at farthest 750 U. C. But this computation is rendered still more probable by another combination, now to be referred to. Kepler ventured the conjecture, in which he is followed by Ebrard, that there might have been an extraordinary star, of the kind seen in Serpentarius, or a comet, in the neighborhood of the conjunction already mentioned. Ideler rejects it, for the sole reason that it "is an *hypothesis*, which in his view we are not obliged to call in to our aid." On astronomical grounds, certainly, the appearance of such new stars involves nothing incredible. The well known astronomer, von Littrow, in the section of his work<sup>2</sup> on "New and Missing Stars," observes: "Great as may be the revolutions which take place on the surface of those fixed stars, which are subject to this alternation of light—what entirely different changes may those others have experienced, which in regions of the firmament where no star had ever been before, appeared to blaze up in clear flames and in them to disappear, perhaps forever." Then he gives a brief his-

---

consequence of the significant conjunction observed in Pisces, presume upon the birth of a *Jewish* king, and direct their course towards Jerusalem. Comp. however, the evidence in Tacit. Hist. 5, 13. and Sueton. Vespas. 4, of a very widely spread expectation of the Messiah. Suetonius says: "*percebueraut oriente toto vetus et constans opinio esse in fatis, ut eo tempore Judaea profecti rerum potirentur.*"

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the principle current in the age of Christ, that the Messiah was to be a higher antitype of Moses: Comp. Gfrörer, Geschichte des Urchristenthums, das Jahrhundert des Heils. Erstes Buch, Zweite Abth. S. 318 sq.

<sup>2</sup> Entitled: Die Wunder der Himmels oder Gemeinfassliche Darstellung der Weltsystems. 2te Aufl. Stuttgart, 1843, § 227.

tory of these stars, which have ever excited the particular attention of astronomers. Among these belongs the star discovered by Kepler in the foot of *Serpentarius*. I make only a single extract, relating to the appearance of a star of special interest. "In the year 1572, on the 11th of November," says Littrow, "Tycho, on passing at night from his chemical laboratory to the observatory, through the court of his house, observed in the constellation, *Cassiopeia*, at a place where before he had only seen very small stars, a new star of uncommon magnitude. It was so bright, that it surpassed even Jupiter and Venus in splendor, and was visible even in the day-time. During the whole time it was visible, Tycho could observe no parallax or change in its position. At the end of one year, however, it gradually diminished, and at length in March, 1574, sixteen months after its discovery, entirely disappeared, since which, all traces of it have been lost. When it first appeared, its light was of a dazzling *white* color; in January, 1573, two months after its discovery, it became *yellowish*; in a few months, it assumed a *reddish* hue, like Mars or *Aldebaran*; and in the beginning of the year 1574, two or three months before its total disappearance, it glimmered only with a grey or *lead colored* light, similar to that of Saturn."

What now, if the existence of a star like this, not far from the birth of Christ could be *historically* proved? The conjunction which occurred would then not only appear much more remarkable, but it could hardly be doubted, that the journey of the Magi to Jerusalem should be placed in close connection with the appearance of this new star. For the possibility of this proof, I am indebted to a notice in Münter,<sup>1</sup> who was only prevented from using it, on account of having placed the year of Christ's birth, chiefly upon other grounds, at the beginning of that conjunction, i. e. in the year 747. I cannot repress my surprise, however, that almost nowhere else, not even in Littrow, is it cited. Münter says: "the Chinese astronomical tables inform us, that a new star appeared at a time which would correspond with the *fourth* year before the birth of Christ, according to our usual mode of computation. In a note upon this, the work from which this notice is borrowed is mentioned,<sup>2</sup> and in that it is stated four years ante aeram vulgarem: *Stella nova in coelo per 70 et am-*

<sup>1</sup> S. 29.

<sup>2</sup> It is entitled: *Tabula chronologica historiae Sinicae, connexa cum cyclo, qui vulgo Kia-tse dicitur, latino Sermone exhibita a Jo. Franc. Fouquet et ad Ann. Chr. 1774, a Stephano Borgia perducta.*

plus dies. This notice<sup>1</sup> was to me the more striking, from having, long before it came to my knowledge, placed the birth of Christ on the same year, 750.

Pingré<sup>2</sup> and Mailla<sup>3</sup> call the new star a comet. Both maintain *two* comets, of which one is related to have appeared in the year 5, the other in the year 4 B. C. Still, as Pingré conjectures, it was only a *single* one, since the descriptions given do not vary from each other. The first, so called, appeared, according to Pingré, in the first and second month in the constellation Nieou (Caput Capricornies); according to Mailla à l'étoile Kien-nieou. The second appeared aux étoiles Ho-Kou (à de l'Aigle et étoiles voisines) au nord de la constellation Kien-nieou (partie du Capricorne). Consequently they appeared in nearly the *same* place in the firmament, only the second, so called, had then advanced somewhat further towards the north. True, the former appeared in the first two months of the year and the latter in the *third* month; but, then, the former must also have been visible in the third month, since it is expressly added that it was visible seventy days, and thus more than *two* months. But if the two comets are identical, this comet must have appeared in the first three months of the Chinese calendar (February to April) in the year 4 B. C. or 750 U. C. The erroneous computation of the time of its appearance, is accounted for by the fact that it is given according to the date of the reign of Gay-ti, the emperor at the time.

<sup>1</sup> Munter introduces this notice with the words: *Uncertain accounts relate, etc.*; but without even a syllable to support this judgment on the historical character of these Chinese tables. On the other hand these tables are regarded, by men at home in this department, as perfectly historical, though not possessing the high degree of accuracy justly expected from the astronomers of the present time. This is the character given to them, e. g. by the astronomer Pingré in his well known work, *Cometographie*, tom I. and II. Paris 1783, 84, 4to.; and the Comtes rendus hebdomadaires des Séances d'Académie des Sciences, à Paris, 4to, tom. XV. pp. 895, 96, contain an essay by N. Langier, in which the comet discovered in the observatory at Paris on the 28th of Oct., 1842, is identified with the one observed in the year 1301 at Cambridge and in China. As one of the works of most authority in Chinese chronology, may be named: *Traité de la chronologie Chinoise*, composé par le père Ganbil, missionnaire à la Chine, et publié pour servir de suite aux mémoires concernant les Chinois, par M. Silvestre de Sacy. A Paris, 1814. 4. A more brief and general account of their astronomical knowledge is given by Stahr in his work: *Untersuchungen über die Ursprünglichkeit und Alterthümlichkeit der Sternkunde unter den Chinesen und Indiern*, Berlin, 1831. 8vo.

<sup>2</sup> Tom I. p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Histoire générale de la Chine ou annales de cet empire traduites du Tong-Kien-Kang-Mon*, publiées par M. l'abbé Grosier, tom III. p. 214.

The comet appeared in the *second* year of the era Kien-ping,<sup>1</sup> established by this monarch on his accession to the throne. We need only to assume, therefore, that the appearance of the star occurred at the end of this year, in order to understand how a date of two different years is assigned by chronologers.—If now the star of the Magi is identical with this star observed by the Chinese, we obtain for their journey to Jerusalem and their sojourn there the fixed date, February to April, 750 U. C.

Combining this Chinese observation of a new star, which could hardly have been borrowed from Christian sources, with the star of the Magi in Matthew, the case stands as follows: Already had the conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, which occurred in the constellation Pisces in the years 747 and 748, excited the expectation, among the eastern astrologers, of some great event about to take place. But when afterwards the extraordinary star was added, they immediately commenced their journey in search of the new-born King. This perhaps will best explain,<sup>2</sup> why they did not reach Jerusalem till a considerable time *after* the first conjunction. Supposing this combination to be correct, we again have the beginning of the year 750, and not the year 747,<sup>3</sup> as the date of Christ's birth.

In connection with the view now presented, it may be added that the appearance of the star when the Magi were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (Matt. 2: 9, 10) and its going before (*προηγες*) them, are in evident accordance, on this theory, with the real facts. Let us commence with the planets Jupiter and Saturn, whose position for the month of February, 750 U. C. I take, because I hold this year and month to be the time at which Jesus was most probably born. According to the astrono-

<sup>1</sup> Comp. on this era, Couplet *tabula chronologica monarchiae Sinicae*, Praef. p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> I would expressly guard, however, against the conclusion, that if this ground should not be found tenable, no other reason can be assigned for the long delay of the Magi.—I would call attention to it, as worthy of notice, that according to Abarbanel's opinion, already cited,—an opinion which must be presumed to have had an existence in the age of Christ,—Moses was born *three years* after a conjunction, from which it would follow that according to the opinion of the Jews in that age, the Messiah would be born *three years* after such a conjunction. This would lead us again, since the first conjunction occurred in the year 747, into the year 750 U. C.

<sup>3</sup> With special reference to the *conjunction* of Jupiter and Saturn which then occurred, Ideler, Mänter, Winer, Ebrard and others have decided in favor of the year 747 as the date of Christ's birth. Kepler, on the other hand, has taken on this ground the year 748 U. C.

mer, Dr. Goldschmidt of Göttingen, to whom I beg leave to return very cordial thanks for the calculations which follow, the geocentric longitude of Jupiter on the first of February 750 was  $55^{\circ} 58'$ ; that of Saturn  $14^{\circ} 17'$ . Both planets were then visible. Jupiter culminated at 6 o'clock and 42 minutes, and set in the latitude of Jerusalem 1 hour and 32 minutes after midnight,  $22^{\circ} 48'$  north of west. Saturn culminated at 4 o'clock and 4 minutes, and set at 10 o'clock and 13 minutes P. M.,  $4^{\circ} 17'$  north of west. Since, therefore, they were now  $41^{\circ}$  apart, only one of the two could come into the account. Hence, perhaps the most probable view is, that the star which went before the Magi, was the new star mentioned above. In that case they must have made their journey to Bethlehem in the morning; for the constellation, Capricorn, in which it appeared, stood in the south-eastern sky, in the month of February, only in the morning. Nothing is more natural than that the thoughts of the Magi, as, full of expectation they were on the way to Bethlehem, should have been employed upon the celestial body which had brought them to Jerusalem in quest of the Messiah, and that when it again shone upon their path, they should have been filled with joy (Matt. 2: 10). Its appearance at that time, they would naturally regard as a good omen; and the more, from its seeming to move in the same direction with the road as if to be their guide. And when Bethlehem, the object of their search, came in sight on the summit of an eminence, they saw the star standing over it. Joyfully they hastened along, and came into the house, where they found the infant Saviour.

[To be continued.]

---

## ARTICLE VIII.

### THE SOURCES OF THE JORDAN, THE LAKE EL-HÜLEH, AND THE ADJACENT COUNTRY.

By Rev. W. M. Thomson, Missionary in Syria. Communicated, with Notes, by E. Robinson.

THE Dead Sea, the Lake of Tiberias, and the interesting valley of the Jordan, have been so frequently visited and so well described by recent travellers, that the topography of all that region has become familiar to almost every one. The case is different with the Lake Hüleh, the sour-