

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM.

THE following explanation of the Star of Bethlehem occurred to me a few years ago, and, as it does not appear to have been noticed by any one else, I now venture to offer it to the public for what it may be worth. My explanation is based on the assumption that the question 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?' is to be taken literally, and that the Magi were in search not of a Messiah or of any unique person, but of a king such as might be born in each generation, the omens for whose birth might be found in astrological works. I take it that the Magi were professional astrologers. They came from the east (*ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν*), where they had seen a star in the east (*ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ*). The difference in number between *ἀνατολῶν* and *ἀνατολῇ* probably indicates that they are to be taken in different senses. In that case *ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ* should mean 'in the eastern quarter of the heaven'. It is in the east that the sun and the stars rise, and an omen for a birth would most naturally be found in the eastern sky. It may be supposed then that an observation was made of a star in the east fulfilling the conditions which, according to astrological science, would constitute an omen of the birth of a king of the Jews. The Magi formed the resolution to offer salutations to the newborn king, and proceeded to the place where such a birth was most likely to take place, namely, Herod's palace. When they arrived, Herod, knowing that no birth had taken place there, suspected that the star betokened the birth of the Messiah, who, he feared, was destined to dethrone his family. It is only at this stage that any reference to the Messiah is introduced into the account. The chief priests and scribes informed Herod that Bethlehem was to be the Messiah's birthplace, and Herod consequently sent the Magi on a secret mission to Bethlehem. The Magi took the road to Bethlehem, and, on the way, they observed the star again. After a time it appeared to stand over a particular house, as it might well do if low on the horizon. The Magi noticed the particular house and followed, and there they found the object of their search. Astrology had guided them to the country, prophecy to the town, and a happy omen to the house.

So much had occurred to me without consulting any astrological work which bore on the subject. The second half of the problem was to discover whether, in what remains to us of ancient astrology, there is anything to indicate what sort of observation would be thus interpreted. It is not likely that the evangelist knew enough astrology to say what precise observation would be interpreted to mean the birth of a king of

the Jews, but he may have known the general type of observation from which such omens were drawn. Some tablets suggesting the method of interpretation are to be found in *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon*, edited by Professor R. C. Thompson (Luzac & Co., 1900). The work is in two volumes, the first of which contains the cuneiform text, and the second, which alone is partly intelligible to me, contains translations, transliterations, and a vocabulary. In this book there are no predictions of births, but there are predictions of the deaths of kings of particular countries, and we find different planets, different portions of the zodiac, different quarters of the moon, and different months of the year allotted to different countries. Now we may be sure that the heavens that blazed forth the death of princes would be quite as likely to render answers about their birth, and that when astrologers began to seek omens for the birth of princes they would look for the same indications of the countries affected, provided that the observations contained those elements, whatever they may have been, that indicated that the omens were those of birth and not of famine or pestilence or victory or death. Among the countries most frequently mentioned on these tablets is one whose name Professor Thompson read as Aḥarrū. Professor Sayce informs me that Amurrū is now considered the proper reading of this name. Amurrū, as Professor Thompson informs us, was identified by the later Babylonians with Palestine and Phoenicia. In other words, it almost exactly coincided with the kingdom of Herod the Great. Now among the deaths of kings predicted on these tablets, there is in No. 44 the death of the king of Amurrū; so that there is every reason to believe that an astrological work including predictions of births would include predictions of the birth of the king of Amurrū.

There is a remarkable variety about the different phenomena of which similar interpretations were given. The death of the king of Amurrū was inferred from a planet (GUD. UD), which Professor Thompson identifies with Mercury,¹ standing within Kumal, apparently a part of Virgo,² at sunset. Kumal, we are told in No. 101, is the star of Amurrū, and, as

¹ Kugler *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel i* (1907) p. 10, regards this interpretation as certain. I append, throughout, the Babylonian names of the planets, because there has been some doubt as to the identification of the names for the period to which these tablets belong, though there is no doubt that Professor Thompson's identifications are those which held good among the later Babylonians. Kugler *op. cit.* pp. 215-225, appears to have demolished the arguments in favour of a transference of names. If no other evidence were available, the observation-tablet of 523 B.C., which can be checked by modern computations, would prove that the names had the same meaning at that date as among the later Babylonians.

² Jensen *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* (1902) p. 370, identifies KU. MAL with Aries; Kugler *op. cit.* pp. 31, 32, 229, 260, leans to this view.

Mercury is always in close attendance on the sun, Mercury at sunset must have been in the west. In this case, then, a king's death is predicted from an omen in the west, and the kingdom is identified by means of the position in the zodiac of the star from which the observation is taken. It would, therefore, be quite analogous for some sunrise observation to be interpreted as the birth of a king. But the predictions of kings' deaths are by no means all connected with the west, and the predictions of kings' births need not all have been connected with the east.

In the following instances reasons are given for connecting omens with Amurrû :—

(i) In Nos. 67, 268, 270, 271, we read 'Siwan = Amurrû', and in 272 we read 'The eclipse of the moon and sun which happened in Siwan—these omens which are evil for Akkad and the kings of Amurrû are for Akkad'.

(ii) In No. 268 we read that 'the top of the moon is Amurrû'. Several omens for Amurrû are drawn from the moon, but whether these observations were connected with the top of the moon or not, we are not informed.

(iii) In No. 101 we read that 'Dilgan-after-which-is-Mulmul is Kumal: Kumal is the star of Amurrû'. Professor Thompson thinks this refers to a part of Virgo.¹ Omens for Amurrû are drawn from observations of Dilgan or of Kumal in Nos. 44 (Mercury in Kumal), 101, and 211 (Venus [Dilbat] in Dilgan).

(iv) In one passage, No. 167, we read :—'When Mars (Muštabarrû-mûtânu), (the star of?), Subartu (Assyria²), grows bright and assumes a brilliance, it is lucky for Subartu. And when Saturn (LU. BAD. SAG. UŠ), the star of Amurrû, grows dim and its brilliance is smitten, it is evil for Amurrû: there will be a hostile attack on Amurrû.' I have found no other tablet where Saturn is connected with Amurrû, or Mars with any other country.

(v) The star most frequently connected with Amurrû is Mars (Muštabarrû-mûtânu). In Nos. 101 and 107 Mars is said to be the star of Amurrû, and omens for Amurrû are drawn from Mars in Nos. 98 and 99. Professor Thompson is of opinion that it is by a forced interpretation that the omen in No. 44 is applied to Amurrû.³ Mulmul according to him may mean either 'two stars' or 'Mars', and hence 'Dilgan-whose-back-part-is-Mulmul', i.e. Kumal, is given the reference which properly belongs to Mars, and the observation in

¹ Kugler *op. cit.* p. 263, thinks DIL. GAN is probably a star in Pisces. Mulmul is certainly Alcyone (*ibid.* p. 32 *et passim*). If Kugler is right, as seems probable, we must substitute Aries for Virgo.

² So Professor Thompson. Professor Sayce informs me that Subartu really means Mesopotamia.

³ Kugler *op. cit.* p. 32, disputes this view.

question is made to mean the slaughter of the king of Amurrû, doubtless an enemy of the Assyrian king at the time. It is rather curious that the identification of Kumal with Amurrû is deduced in No. 101 from an argument beginning with 'Mars is the star of Amurrû'. At all events, it is clear that in this case the planet Mars and the part of the zodiac called Kumal were connected in the mind of the astrologer, and therefore the instances mentioned under (iii) above, belong to the same group of identifications as those in this paragraph.

There are several other omens about Amurrû, where the reason for selecting that country is not given.

Now there can be no doubt that in the story of the Magi the evangelist contemplates the star as belonging to the king of the Jews. It is not an omen drawn, because of some incidental circumstance, from another star. It is 'his star', and it is the reappearance of the star, probably no longer in its original position, that causes the Magi to rejoice. It is of course impossible to say for certain which star this was, but it is clear from what has been said above that Muštarrû-mûtanu, which is identified with Mars, was the star most frequently regarded as the star of Amurrû, and the star most likely to herald the birth of its king. It is, moreover, when favourably situated, a conspicuous star, and therefore the more likely to have struck the attention of the Magi on their journey to Bethlehem. The evangelist may have known nothing of Mars, but he may have known that there was a star of Amurrû, and it is interesting, if not exegetically important, to know what star was so regarded. If any one asks further, what observation of Mars would be interpreted to mean the birth of a king of the Jews, the question can only be answered, if at all, when more tablets have been deciphered. All that we know is that the wise men saw the star in the east, and it is only wise men from the east that can give us information about it.

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