

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE VISIT AND HOMAGE OF THE MAGI, AND THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

(St. Matt. ii. 1-8.)

With the Presentation of the Infant Saviour in the Temple, and His acknowledgment – not indeed by the leaders of Israel, but, characteristically, by the representatives of those earnest men and women who looked for His Advent - the Prologue, if such it may be called, to the third Gospel closes. From whatever source its information was derived - perhaps, as has been suggested, its earlier portion from the Virgin-Mother, the later from Anna; or else both alike from her, who with loving reverence and wonderment treasured it all in her heart - its marvellous details could not have been told with greater simplicity, nor yet with more exquisitely delicate grace. On the other hand, the Prologue to the first Gospel, while omitting these, records other incidents of the infancy of the Saviour. The plan of these narratives, or the sources whence they may originally have been derived, may account for the omissions in either case. At first sight it may seem strange, that the cosmopolitan Gospel by St. Luke should have described what took place in the Temple, and the homage of the Jews, while the Gospel by St. Matthew, which was primarily intended for Hebrews, records only the homage of the Gentiles, and the circumstances which led to the flight into Egypt. But of such seeming contrasts there are not a few in the Gospel-history - discords, which soon resolve themselves into glorious harmony.

The story of the homage to the Infant Saviour by the *Magi* is told by St. Matthew, in language of which the brevity constitutes the chief difficulty. Even their designation is not free from ambiguity. The term *Magi* is used in the LXX., by Philo, Josephus, and by profane writers, alike in an evil and, so to speak, in a good sense - in the former case as implying the practice of magical arts; in the latter, as referring to the those Eastern (especially Chaldee) priest-sages, whose researches, in great measure as yet mysterious and unknown to us, seem to have embraced much deep knowledge, though not untinged with superstition. It is to these latter, that the Magi spoken of by St. Matthew must have belonged. Their number - to which, however, no importance attaches - cannot be ascertained. Various suggestions have been made as to the country of 'the East,' whence they came. At the period in question the sacerdotal caste of the Medes and Persians was dispersed over various parts of the East, and the presence in those lands of a large Jewish *diaspora*, through which they might, and probably would, gain knowledge of the great hope of Israel, is sufficiently attested by Jewish history. The oldest opinion traces the Magi - though partially on insufficient grounds - to *Arabia*. And there is this in favor of it, that not only the closest intercourse existed between Palestine and Arabia, but that from about 120 b.c. to the sixth century of our era, the kings of *Yemen* professed the Jewish faith. For if, on the one hand, it seems unlikely, that Eastern Magi would spontaneously connect a celestial phenomenon with the birth of a Jewish king, evidence will, on the other hand, be presented to connect the meaning attached to the appearance of 'the star' at that particular time with Jewish expectancy of the Messiah. But we are anticipating.

Shortly after the Presentation of the Infant Saviour in the Temple, certain Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem with strange tidings. They had seen at its 'rising' a sidereal appearance, which they regarded as betokening the birth of the Messiah King of the Jews, in the sense which at the time attached to that designation. Accordingly, they had come to Jerusalem to pay homage to Him, probably not because they imagined He must be born in the Jewish capital but because they would naturally expect there to obtain authentic information, 'where' He might be found. In their simplicity of heart, the Magi addressed themselves in the first place to the official head of the nation. The rumor of such an inquiry, and by such persons, would rapidly spread throughout the city. But it produced on King Herod, and in the capital, a far different impression from the feeling of the Magi. Unscrupulously cruel as Herod had always proved, even the slightest suspicion of danger to his rule - the bare possibility of the Advent of One, Who had such claims upon the allegiance of Israel, and Who, if acknowledged, would evoke the most intense movement on their part - must have struck terror to his heart. Not that he could believe the tidings, though a dread of their possibility might creep over a nature such as Herod's; but the bare thought of a Pretender, with such claims, would fill him with suspicion, apprehension, and impotent rage. Nor is it difficult to understand, that the whole city should, although on different grounds, have shared the 'trouble' of the king. It was certainly not, as some have suggested, from apprehension of 'the woes' which, according to popular notions, were to accompany the Advent of Messiah.

Throughout the history of Christ the absence of such ‘woes’ was never made a ground of objection to His Messianic claims; and this, because these ‘woes’ were not associated with the first Advent of the Messiah, but with His final manifestation in power. And between these two periods a more or less long interval was supposed to intervene, during which the Messiah would be ‘hidden,’ either in the literal sense, or perhaps as to His power, or else in both respects. This enables us to understand the question of the disciples, as to the sign of His coming and the end of the world, and the answer of the Master. But the people of Jerusalem had far other reason to fear. They knew only too well the character of Herod, and what the consequences would be to them, or to any one who might be suspected, however unjustly, of sympathy with any claimant to the royal throne of David.

Herod took immediate measures, characterised by his usual cunning. He called together all the High-Priests - past and present - and all the learned Rabbis, and, without committing himself as to whether the Messiah was already born, or only expected, simply propounded to them the question of His birthplace. This would show him where Jewish expectancy looked for the appearance of his rival, and thus enable him to watch alike that place and the people generally, while it might possibly bring to light the feelings of the leaders of Israel. At the same time he took care diligently to inquire the precise time, when the sidereal appearance had first attracted the attention of the Magi. This would enable him to judge, how far back he would have to make his own inquiries, since the birth of the Pretender might be made to synchronise with the earliest appearance of the sidereal phenomenon. So long as any one lived, who was born in Bethlehem between the *earliest* appearance of this ‘star’ and the time of the arrival of the Magi, he was not safe. The subsequent conduct of Herod shows, that the Magi must have told him, that their earliest observation of the sidereal phenomenon had taken place two years before their arrival in Jerusalem.

The assembled authorities of Israel could only return one answer to the question submitted by Herod. As shown by the rendering of the Targum Jonathan, the prediction in Micah v. 2 was at the time universally understood as pointing to Bethlehem, as the birthplace of the Messiah. That such was the general expectation, appears from the Talmud, where, in an imaginary conversation between an Arab and a Jew, Bethlehem is authoritatively named as Messiah’s birthplace. St. Matthew reproduces the prophetic utterance of Micah, exactly as such quotations were popularly made at that time. It will be remembered that, Hebrew being a dead language so far as the people were concerned, the Holy Scriptures were always translated into the popular dialect, the person so doing being designated *Methurgeman* (*dragoman*) or interpreter. These renderings, which at the time of St. Matthew were not yet allowed to be written down, formed the precedent for, if not the basis of, our later *Targum*. In short, at that time each one *Targumed* for himself, and these *Targumim* (as our existing one on the Prophets shows) were neither literal versions, nor yet paraphrases, but something between them, a sort of interpreting translation. That, when Targuming, the New Testament writers should in preference make use of such a well-known and widely-spread version as the Translation of the LXX. needs no explanation. That they did not confine themselves to it, but, when it seemed necessary, literally or Targumically rendered a verse, appears from the actual quotations in the New Testament. Such *Targuming* of the Old Testament was entirely in accordance with the then universal method of setting Holy Scripture before a popular audience. It is needless to remark, that the New Testament writers would *Targum* as Christians. These remarks apply not only to the case under immediate consideration, but generally to the quotations from the Old Testament in the New.

The further conduct of Herod was in keeping with his plans. He sent for the Magi – for various reasons, *secretly*. After ascertaining the precise time, when they had first observed the ‘star,’ he directed them to Bethlehem, with the request to inform him when they had found the Child; on pretence, that he was equally desirous with them to pay Him homage. As they left Jerusalem for the goal of their pilgrimage, to their surprise and joy, the ‘star,’ which had attracted their attention at its ‘rising,’ and which, as seems implied in the narrative, they had not seen of late, once more appeared on the horizon, and seemed to move before them, till ‘it stood over where the young child was’ - that is, of course, over Bethlehem, not over any special house in it. Whether at a turn of the road, close to Bethlehem, they lost sight of it, or they no longer heeded its position, since it had seemed to go before them to the goal that had been pointed out - for, surely, they needed not the star to *guide* them to Bethlehem - or whether the celestial phenomenon now disappeared, is neither stated in the Gospel-narrative, nor is indeed of any importance. Sufficient for them, and for us: they had been authoritatively directed

to Bethlehem; as they had set out for it, the sidereal phenomenon had once more appeared; and it had seemed to go before them, till it actually stood over Bethlehem. And, since in ancient times such extraordinary 'guidance' by a 'star' was matter of belief and expectancy, the Magi would, from their standpoint, regard it as the fullest confirmation that they had been rightly directed to Bethlehem, and 'they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.' It could not be difficult to learn in Bethlehem, where the Infant, around Whose Birth marvels had gathered, might be found. It appears that the temporary shelter of the 'stable' had been exchanged by the Holy Family for the more permanent abode of a 'house;' and there the Magi found the Infant-Saviour with His Mother. With exquisite tact and reverence the narrative attempts not the faintest description of the scene. It is as if the sacred writer had fully entered into the spirit of St. Paul, 'Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more.' And thus it should ever be. It is the great fact of the manifestation of Christ - not its outward surroundings, however precious or touching they might be in connection with any ordinary earthly being - to which our gaze must be directed. The externals may, indeed, attract our sensuous nature; but they detract from the unmatched glory of the great supersensuous Reality. Around the Person of the God-Man, in the hour when the homage of the heathen world was first offered Him, we need not, and want not, the drapery of outward circumstances. That scene is best realized, not by description, but by silently joining in the silent homage and the silent offerings of 'the wise men from the East.'

Before proceeding further, we must ask ourselves two questions: What relationship does this narrative bear to Jewish expectancy? and, Is there any astronomical confirmation of this account? Besides their intrinsic interest, the answer to the first question will determine, whether any legendary basis could be assigned to the narrative; while on the second will depend, whether the account can be truthfully charged with an accommodation on the part of God to the superstitions and errors of astrology. For, if the whole was extranatural, and the sidereal appearance specially produced in order to meet the astrological views of the Magi, it would not be a sufficient answer to the difficulty, 'that great catastrophes and unusual phenomena in nature have synchronised in a remarkable manner with great events in human history. On the other hand, if the sidereal appearance was not of supernatural origin, and would equally have taken place whether or not there had been Magi to direct to Bethlehem, the difficulty is not only entirely removed, but the narrative affords another instance, alike of the condescension of God to the lower standpoint of the Magi, and of His wisdom and goodness in the combination of circumstances.

As regards the question of Jewish expectancy, sufficient has been said in the preceding pages, to show that Rabbinism looked for a very different kind and manner of the world's homage to the Messiah than that of a few Magi, guided by a star to His Infant-Home. Indeed, so far from serving as historical basis for the origin of such a 'legend' a more gross caricature of Jewish Messianic anticipation could scarcely be imagined. Similarly futile would it be to seek a background for this narrative in Balaam's prediction, since it is incredible that any one could have understood it as referring to a brief sidereal apparition to a few Magi, in order to bring them to look for the Messiah. Nor can it be represented as intended to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah, that 'they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord.' For, supposing this figurative language to have been grossly literalised, what would become of the other part of that prophecy, which must, of course, have been treated in the same manner; not to speak of the fact, that the whole evidently refers not to the Messiah (least of all in His Infancy), but to Jerusalem in her latter-day glory. Thus, we fail to perceive any historical basis for a legendary origin of St. Matthew's narrative, either in the Old Testament or, still less, in Jewish tradition. And we are warranted in asking: If the account be not true, what rational explanation can be given of its origin, since its invention would never have occurred to any contemporary Jew?

But this is not all. There seems, indeed, no logical connection between this astrological interpretation of the Magi, and any supposed practice of astrology among the Jews. Yet, strange to say, writers have largely insisted on this. The charge is, to say the least, grossly exaggerated. That Jewish - as other Eastern - impostors pretended to astrological knowledge, and that such investigations may have been secretly carried on by certain Jewish students, is readily admitted. But the language of disapproval in which these pursuits are referred to - such as that knowledge of the Law is not found with astrologers - and the emphatic statement, that he who learned even one thing from a *Mage* deserved death, show what views were authoritatively held. Of course, the

Jews (or many of them), like most ancients, believed in the influence of the planets upon the destiny of man. But it was a principle strongly expressed, and frequently illustrated in the Talmud, that such planetary influence did *not* extend to Israel. It must be admitted, that this was not always consistently carried out; and there were Rabbis who computed a man's future from the constellation (the *Mazzal*), either of the day, or the hour, under which he was born. It was supposed, that some persons had a star of their own, and the (representative) stars of all proselytes were said to have been present at Mount Sinai. Accordingly, they also, like Israel, had lost the defilement of the serpent (sin). One Rabbi even had it, that success, wisdom, the duration of life, and a posterity, depended upon the constellation. Such views were carried out till they merged in a kind of fatalism, or else in the idea of a 'natal affinity,' by which persons born under the same constellation were thought to stand in sympathetic *rapport*. The further statement, that conjunctions of the planets affected the products of the earth is scarcely astrological; nor perhaps this, that an eclipse of the sun betokened evil to the nations, an eclipse of the moon to Israel, because the former calculated time by the sun, the latter by the moon.

But there is one illustrative Jewish statement which, though not astrological, is of the greatest importance, although it seems to have been hitherto overlooked. Since the appearance of *Münter's* well known tractate on the Star of the Magi, writers have endeavoured to show, that Jewish expectancy of a Messiah was connected with a peculiar sidereal conjunction, such as that which occurred two years before the birth of our Lord, and this on the ground of a quotation from the well-known Jewish commentator Abarbanel (or rather *Abrabanel*). In his Commentary on Daniel that Rabbi laid it down, that the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces betokened not only the most important events, but referred especially to Israel (for which he gives five mystic reasons). He further argues that, as that conjunction had taken place three years before the birth of Moses, which heralded the first deliverance of Israel, so it would also precede the birth of the Messiah, and the final deliverance of Israel. But the argument fails, not only because Abarbanel's calculations are inconclusive and even erroneous, but because it is manifestly unfair to infer the state of Jewish belief at the time of Christ from a haphazard astrological conceit of a Rabbi of the fifteenth century. There is, however, testimony which seems to us not only reliable, but embodies most ancient Jewish tradition. It is contained in one of the smaller *Midrashim*, of which a collection has lately been published. On account of its importance, one quotation at least from it should be made in full. The so-called Messiah-Haggadah (*Aggadoth Mashiach*) opens as follows: '*A star shall come out of Jacob. There is a Boraita in the name of the Rabbis: The heptad in which the Son of David cometh - in the first year, there will not be sufficient nourishment; in the second year the arrows of famine are launched; in the third, a great famine; in the fourth, neither famine nor plenty; in the fifth, great abundance, and the Star shall shine forth from the East, and this is the Star of the Messiah. And it will shine from the East for fifteen days, and if it be prolonged, it will be for the good of Israel; in the sixth, sayings (voices), and announcements (hearings); in the seventh, wars, and at the close of the seventh the Messiah is to be expected.*' A similar statement occurs at the close of a collection of three Midrashim - respectively entitled, 'The Book of Elijah,' 'Chapters about the Messiah,' and 'The Mysteries of R. Simon, the son of Jochai' - where we read that a Star in the East was to appear two years before the birth of the Messiah. The statement is almost equally remarkable, whether it represents a tradition previous to the birth of Jesus, or originated after that event. But *two years* before the birth of Christ, which, as we have calculated, took place in December 749 a.u.c., or 5 before the Christian era, brings us to the year 747 a.u.c., or 7 before Christ, in which such a Star should appear in the East.

Did such a Star, then, really appear in the East seven years before the Christian era? Astronomically speaking, and without any reference to controversy, there can be no doubt that the most remarkable conjunction of planets - that of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pices, which occurs only once in 800 years - *did* take place no less than three times in the year 747 a.u.c., or two years before the birth of Christ (in May, October and December). This conjunction is admitted by all astronomers. It was not only extraordinary, but presented the most brilliant spectacle in the night-sky, such as could not but attract the attention of all who watched the sidereal heavens, but especially of those who busied themselves with astrology. In the year following, that is, in 748 a.u.c., another planet, Mars, joined this conjunction. The merit of first discovering these facts - of which it is unnecessary here to present the literary history - belongs to the great *Kepler*, who,

accordingly, placed the Nativity of Christ in the year 748 a.u.c. This date, however, is not only well-nigh impossible; but it has also been shown that such a conjunction would, for various reasons, not answer the requirements of the Evangelical narrative, so far as the guidance to Bethlehem is concerned. But it does fully account for the attention of the Magi being aroused, and - even if they had not possessed knowledge of the Jewish expectancy above described - for their making inquiry of all around, and certainly, among others, of the Jews. Here we leave the domain of the *certain*, and enter upon that of the *probable*. Kepler, who was led to the discovery by observing a similar conjunction in 1603-4, also noticed, that when the three planets came into conjunction, a new, extraordinary, brilliant, and peculiarly colored evanescent star was visible between Jupiter and Saturn, and he suggested that a similar star had appeared under the same circumstances in the conjunction preceding the Nativity. Of this, of course, there is not, and cannot be, absolute certainty. But, if so, this would be 'the star' of the Magi, 'in its rising.' There is yet another remarkable statement, which, however, must also be assigned only to the domain of the *probable*. In the astronomical tables of the Chinese - to whose general trustworthiness so high an authority as *Humboldt* bears testimony - the appearance of an evanescent star was noted. Pingre and others have designated it as a comet, and calculated its first appearance in February 750 a.u.c., which is just the time when the Magi would, in all probability, leave Jerusalem for Bethlehem, since this must have preceded the death of Herod, which took place in March 750. Moreover, it has been astronomically ascertained, that such a sidereal apparition would be visible to those who left Jerusalem, and that it would point - almost seem to go before - in the direction of, and stand over, Bethlehem. Such, impartially stated, are the facts of the case - and here the subject must, in the present state of our information, be left.

Only two things are recorded of this visit of the Magi to Bethlehem: their humblest Eastern homage, and their offerings. Viewed as gifts, the incense and the myrrh would, indeed, have been strangely inappropriate. But their offerings were evidently intended as specimens of the products of their country, and their presentation was, even as in our own days, expressive of the homage of their country to the new-found King. In this sense, then, the Magi may truly be regarded as the representatives of the Gentile world; their homage as the first and typical acknowledgment of Christ by those who hitherto had been 'far off;' and their offerings as symbolic of the world's tribute. This deeper significance the ancient Church has rightly apprehended, though, perhaps, mistaking its grounds. Its symbolism, twining, like the convolvulus, around the Divine Plant, has traced in the gold the emblem of His Royalty; in the myrrh, of His Humanity, and that in the fullest evidence of it, in His burying; and in the incense, that of His Divinity.

As always in the history of Christ, so here also, glory and offering appear in juxtaposition. It could not be, that these Magi should become the innocent instruments of Herod's murderous designs; nor yet that the Infant-Saviour should fall a victim to the tyrant. Warned of God in a dream, the 'wise men' returned 'into their own country another way;' and, warned by the angel of the Lord in a dream, the Holy Family sought temporary shelter in Egypt. Baffled in the hope of attaining his object through the Magi, the reckless tyrant sought to secure it by an indiscriminate slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem and its immediate neighborhood, from two years and under. True, considering the population of Bethlehem, their number could only have been small, probably twenty at most. But the deed was none the less atrocious; and these infants may justly be regarded as the 'protomartyrs,' the first witnesses, of Christ, 'the blossom of martyrdom' ('flores martyrum,' as *Prudentius* calls them). The slaughter was entirely in accordance with the character and former measures of Herod. Nor do we wonder, that it remained unrecorded by Josephus, since on other occasions also he has omitted events which to us seem important. The murder of a few infants in an insignificant village might appear scarcely worth notice in a reign stained by so much bloodshed. Besides, he had, perhaps, a special motive for this silence. Josephus always carefully suppresses, so far as possible, all that refers to the Christ - probably not only in accordance with his own religious views, but because mention of a Christ might have been dangerous, certainly would have been inconvenient, in a work written by an intense self-seeker, mainly for readers in Rome.

Of two passages in his own Old Testament Scriptures the Evangelist sees a fulfilment in these events. The flight into Egypt is to him the fulfilment of this expression by Hosea, 'Out of Egypt have I called My Son.' In the murder of 'the Innocents,' he sees the fulfilment of Rachel's lament (who died and was buried in Ramah) over her children, the men of Benjamin, when the exiles to Babylon met in Ramah, and there was bitter wailing

at the prospect of parting for hopeless captivity, and yet bitterer lament, as they who might have encumbered the onward march were pitilessly slaughtered. Those who have attentively followed the course of Jewish thinking, and marked how the ancient Synagogue, and that rightly, read the Old Testament in its unity, as ever pointing to the Messiah as the fulfilment of Israel's history, will not wonder at, but fully accord with, St. Matthew's retrospective view. The words of Hosea were in the highest sense 'fulfilled' in the flight to, and return of, the Saviour from Egypt. To an inspired writer, nay, to a true Jewish reader of the Old Testament, the question in regard to any prophecy could not be: What did *the prophet* - but, What did the *prophecy* - mean? And this could only be unfolded in the course of Israel's history. Similarly, those who ever saw in the past the prototype of the future, and recognized in events, not only the principle, but the very features, of that which was to come, could not fail to perceive, in the bitter wail of the mothers of Bethlehem over their slaughtered children, the full realisation of the prophetic description of the scene enacted in Jeremiah's days. Had not the prophet himself heard, in the lament of the captives to Babylon, the echoes of Rachel's voice in the past? In neither one nor the other case had the utterances of the prophets (Hosea and Jeremiah) been *predictions*: they were *prophetic*. In neither one nor the other case was the 'fulfilment' literal: it was Scriptural, and that in the truest Old Testament sense.