

resting-place. The Magi, as we see from St. Matthew, visited Mary in "the house." But on all these minor incidents the Gospels do not dwell. The fullest of them is St. Luke, and the singular sweetness of his narrative, its almost idyllic grace, its sweet calm tone of noble reticence, seem clearly to indicate that he derived it, though but in fragmentary notices, from the lips of Mary herself. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine from whom else it could have come, for mothers are the natural historians of infant years; but it is interesting to find, in the actual style, that "colouring of a woman's memory and a woman's view," which we should naturally have expected in confirmation of a conjecture so obvious and so interesting. To one who was giving the reins to his imagination, the minutest incidents would have claimed a description; to Mary they would have seemed trivial and irrelevant. Others might wonder, but in her all wonder was lost in the one overwhelming revelation—the one absorbing consciousness. Of such things she could not lightly speak; "she kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." The very depth and sacredness of that reticence is the natural and probable explanation of the fact that some of the details of the Saviour's infancy are fully recorded by St. Luke alone.

LESSON TWO

CHAPTER II.

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE.

FOUR other events only of our Lord's infancy are narrated by the Gospels—namely, the Circumcision, the Presentation in the Temple, the Visit of the Magi, and the Flight into Egypt. Of these the first two occur only in St. Luke, the last two only in St. Matthew. Yet no single particular can be pointed out in which the two narratives are necessarily contradictory. If, on other grounds, we have ample reason to accept the evidence of the Evangelists, as evidence given by witnesses of unimpeachable honesty, we have every right to believe that, to whatever cause the confessed fragmentariness of their narratives may be due, those narratives may fairly be regarded as supplementing each other. It is as dishonest to assume the existence of irreconcilable discrepancies as it is to suggest the adoption of impossible harmonies. The accurate and detailed sequence of biographical narrative from the

earliest years of life was a thing wholly unknown to the Jews, and alien alike from their style and temperament. Anecdotes of infancy, incidents of childhood, indications of future greatness in boyish years, are a very rare phenomenon in ancient literature. It is only since the dawn of Christianity that childhood has been surrounded by a halo of romance.

The exact order of the events which occurred before the return to Nazareth can only be a matter of uncertain conjecture. The Circumcision was on the eighth day after the birth (Luke i. 59 ; ii. 21) ; the Purification was thirty-three days after the Circumcision (Lev. xii. 4) ; the Visit of the Magi was when "Jesus was born in Bethlehem" (Matt. ii. 1) ; and the Flight into Egypt immediately after their departure. The supposition that the return from Egypt was previous to the Presentation in the Temple, though not absolutely impossible, seems most improbable. To say nothing of the fact that such a postponement would have been a violation (however necessary) of the Levitical law, it would either involve the supposition that the Purification was long postponed, which seems to be contradicted by the twice-repeated expression of St. Luke (ii. 22, 39) ; or it supposes that forty days allowed sufficient time for the journey of the Wise Men from "the East," and for the flight to, and return from, Egypt. It involves, moreover, the extreme improbability of a return of the Holy Family to Jerusalem—a town but six miles distant from Bethlehem—within a few days after an event so frightful as the Massacre of the Innocents. Although no supposition is entirely free from the objections which necessarily arise out of our ignorance of the circumstances, it seems almost certain that the Flight into Egypt, and the circumstances which led to it, did not occur till after the Presentation. For forty days, therefore, the Holy Family were left in peace and obscurity, in a spot surrounded by so many scenes of interest, and hallowed by so many traditions of their family and race.

Of the Circumcision no mention is made by the apocryphal gospels, except an amazingly repulsive one in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. It was not an incident which would be likely to interest those whose object it was to intrude their own dogmatic fancies into the sacred story. But to the Christian it has its own solemn meaning. It shows that Christ came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfil. Thus it became Him to fulfil all righteousness. Thus early did He suffer pain for our sakes, to teach us the spiritual circumcision—the circumcision of the heart—the circumcision of all our bodily senses. As the East catches

at sunset the colours of the West, so Bethlehem is a prelude to Calvary, and even the Infant's cradle is tinged with a crimson reflection from the Redeemer's cross. It was on this day, too, that Christ first publicly received that name of Jesus, which the command of the angel Gabriel had already announced. "Hoshea" meant salvation; Joshua, "whose salvation is Jehovah;" Jesus is but the English modification of the Greek form of the name. At this time it was a name extraordinarily common among the Jews. It was dear to them as having been borne by the great Leader who had conducted them into victorious possession of the Promised Land, and by the great High Priest who had headed the band of exiles who returned from Babylon; but henceforth—not for Jews only, but for all the world—it was destined to acquire a significance infinitely more sacred as the mortal designation of the Son of God. The Hebrew "Messiah" and the Greek "Christ" were names which represented His office as the Anointed Prophet, Priest, and King; but "Jesus" was the personal name which He bore as one who "emptied Himself of His glory" to become a sinless man among sinful men.

On the fortieth day after the nativity—until which time she could not leave the house—the Virgin presented herself with her Babe for their Purification in the Temple at Jerusalem. "Thus, then," says St. Bonaventura, "do they bring the Lord of the Temple to the Temple of the Lord." The proper offering on such occasions was a yearling lamb for a burnt-offering, and a young pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering; but with that beautiful tenderness which is so marked a characteristic of the Mosaic legislation, those who were too poor for so comparatively costly an offering, were allowed to bring instead two turtle-doves or two young pigeons. With this humble offering Mary presented herself to the priest. At the same time Jesus, as being a first-born son, was presented to God, and, in accordance with the law, was redeemed from the necessity of Temple service by the ordinary payment of five shekels of the sanctuary (Numb. xviii. 15, 16), amounting in value to about fifteen shillings. Of the Purification and Presentation no further details are given to us, but this visit to the Temple was rendered memorable by a double incident—the recognition of the Infant Saviour by Simeon and Anna.

Of Simeon we are simply told that he was a just and devout Israelite endowed with the gift of prophecy, and that having received divine intimation that his death would not take place till he had seen the Messiah, he entered under some inspired impulse into the Temple, and

there, recognising the Holy Child, took Him in his arms, and burst into that glorious song—the “Nunc Dimittis”—which for eighteen centuries has been so dear to Christian hearts. The prophecy that the Babe should be “a light to lighten the *Gentiles*,” no less than the strangeness of the circumstances, may well have caused astonishment to His parents, from whom the aged prophet did not conceal their own future sorrows—warning the Virgin Mother especially, both of the deadly opposition which that Divine Child was destined to encounter, and of the national perils which should agitate the days to come.

Legend has been busy with the name of Simeon. In the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, he recognises Jesus because he sees Him shining like a pillar of light in His mother’s arms. Nicephorus tells us that, in reading the Scriptures, he had stumbled at the verse, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son” (Isa. vii. 14), and had then received the intimation that he should not die till he had seen it fulfilled. All attempts to identify him with other Simeons have failed. Had he been a High Priest, or President of the Sanhedrin, St. Luke would not have introduced him so casually as “a man (*ἄνθρωπος*) in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.” The statement in the ^{*}Gospel of the Nativity of Mary that he was 113 years old is wholly arbitrary; as is the conjecture that the silence of the Talmud about him is due to his Christian proclivities. He could not have been Rabban Simeon, the son of Hillel, and father of Gamaliel, who would not at this time have been so old. Still less could he have been the far earlier Simeon the Just, who was believed to have prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, and who was the last survivor of the great Sanhedrin. It is curious that we should be told nothing respecting him, while of Anna the prophetess several interesting particulars are given, and among others that she was of the tribe of Asher—a valuable proof that tribal relations still lived affectionately in the memory of the people.

*** Another apocryphal gospel and, thus, unreliable.
Used only for illustration- not factual history.**

CHAPTER III.

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI.

THE brief narrative of the Visit of the Magi, recorded in the second chapter of St. Matthew, is of the deepest interest in the history of Christianity. It is, in the first place, the Epiphany, or

Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. It brings the facts of the Gospel history into close connection with Jewish belief, with ancient prophecy, with secular history, and with modern science; and in doing so it furnishes us with new confirmations of our faith, derived incidentally, and therefore in the most unsuspecting manner, from indisputable and unexpected quarters.

Herod the Great, who, after a life of splendid misery and criminal success, had now sunk into the jealous decrepitude of his savage old age, was residing in his new palace on Zion, when, half-maddened as he was already by the crimes of his past career, he was thrown into a fresh paroxysm of alarm and anxiety by the visit of some Eastern Magi, bearing the strange intelligence that they had seen in the East the star of a new-born king of the Jews, and had come to worship him. Herod, a mere Idumæan usurper, a more than suspected apostate, the detested tyrant over an unwilling people, the sacrilegious plunderer of the tomb of David—Herod, a descendant of the despised Ishmael and the hated Esau, heard the tidings with a terror and indignation which it was hard to dissimulate. The grandson of one who, as was believed, had been a mere servitor in a temple at Ascalon, and who in his youth had been carried off by Edomite brigands, he well knew how worthless were his pretensions to an historic throne which he held solely by successful adventure. But his craft equalled his cruelty, and finding that all Jerusalem shared his suspense, he summoned to his palace the leading priests and theologians of the Jews—perhaps the relics of that Sanhedrin which he had long reduced to a despicable shadow—to inquire of them where the Messiah was to be born. He received the ready and confident answer that Bethlehem was the town indicated for that honour by the prophecy of Micah. Concealing, therefore, his desperate intention, he despatched the Wise Men to Bethlehem, bidding them to let him know as soon as they had found the child, that he too might come and do him reverence.

Before continuing the narrative, let us pause to inquire who these Eastern wanderers were, and what can be discovered respecting their mysterious mission.

The name "Magi," by which they are called in the Greek of St. Matthew, is perfectly vague. It meant originally a sect of Median and Persian scholars; it was subsequently applied (as in Acts xiii. 6) to pretended astrologers, or Oriental soothsayers. Such characters were well known to antiquity, under the name of **Chaldeans**, and their visits

were by no means unfamiliar even to the Western nations. Diogenes Laertius reports to us a story of Aristotle, that a Syrian *Mage* had predicted to Socrates that he would die a violent death; and Seneca informs us that Magi, who chanced to be at Athens, had visited the tomb of Plato, and had there offered incense to him as a divine being. There is nothing but a mass of confused and contradictory traditions to throw any light either on their rank, their country, their number, or their names. The tradition which makes them kings was probably founded on the prophecy of Isaiah (lx. 3): "And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." The fancy that they were Arabians may have arisen from the fact that myrrh and frankincense are Arabian products, and from the passage in Ps. lxxii. 10, "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall give presents; the kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts."

There was a double tradition as to their number. Augustine and Chrysostom say that there were twelve, but the common belief, arising perhaps from the triple gifts, is that they were three in number. The Venerable Bede even gives us their names, their country, and their personal appearance. Melchior was an old man with white hair and long beard; Caspar, a ruddy and beardless youth; Balthasar, swarthy and in the prime of life. We are further informed by tradition that Melchior was a descendant of Shem, Caspar of Ham, and Balthasar of Japheth. Thus they are made representatives of the three periods of life, and the three divisions of the globe; and valueless as such fictions may be for direct historical purposes, they have been rendered interesting by their influence on the most splendid productions of religious art. The skulls of these three kings, each circled with its crown of jewelled gold, are still exhibited among the relics in the cathedral at Cologne.

It is, however, more immediately to our purpose to ascertain the causes of their memorable journey.

We are informed by Tacitus, by Suetonius, and by Josephus, that there prevailed throughout the entire East at this time an intense conviction, derived from ancient prophecies, that ere long a powerful monarch would arise in Judæa, and gain dominion over the world. It has, indeed, been conjectured that the Roman historians may simply be echoing an assertion for which Josephus was in reality their sole authority; but even if we accept this uncertain supposition, there is still ample proof, both in Jewish and in Pagan writings, that a guilty and weary world was dimly expecting the advent of its Deliverer.

“The dew of blessing falls not on us, and our fruits have no taste,” exclaimed Rabban Simeon, the son of Gamaliel; and the expression might sum up much of the literature of an age which was, as Niebuhr says, “effete with the drunkenness of crime.” The splendid vaticination in the fourth Eclogue of Virgil proves the intensity of the feeling, and has long been reckoned among the “unconscious prophecies of heathendom.”

There is, therefore, nothing extraordinary in the fact that these Eastern Magi should have bent their steps to Jerusalem, especially if there were any circumstances to awaken in the East a more immediate conviction that this wide-spread expectation was on the point of fulfilment. If they were disciples of Zoroaster, they would see in the infant King the future conqueror of Ahriman, the destined Lord of all the World. The story of their journey has indeed been set down with contemptuous confidence as a mere poetic myth; but though its actual historic verity must rest on the testimony of the Evangelist alone, there are many facts which enable us to see that in its main outlines it involves nothing either impossible or even improbable.

Now St. Matthew tells us that the cause of their expectant attitude was that they had seen the star of the Messiah in the East, and that to discover Him was the motive of their journey.

That any strange sidereal phenomenon should be interpreted as the signal of a coming king, was in strict accordance with the belief of their age. Such a notion may well have arisen from the prophecy of Balaam, the Gentile sorcerer—a prophecy which, from the power of its rhythm and the splendour of its imagery, could hardly fail to be disseminated in eastern countries. Nearly a century afterwards, the false Messiah, in the reign of Hadrian, received from the celebrated Rabbi Akiba, the surname of Bar-Cochba, or “Son of a Star,” and caused a star to be stamped upon the coinage which he issued. Six centuries afterwards, Mohammed is said to have pointed to a comet as a portent illustrative of his pretensions. Even the Greeks and Romans had always considered that the births and deaths of great men were symbolised by the appearance and disappearance of heavenly bodies, and the same belief has continued down to comparatively modern times. The evanescent star which appeared in the time of Tycho Brahe, and was noticed by him on Nov. 11, 1572, was believed to indicate the brief but dazzling career of some warrior from the north, and was subsequently regarded as having been prophetic of the fortunes of Gustavus Adolphus. Now it so happens that, although the

exact year in which Christ was born is not ascertainable with any certainty from Scripture, yet, within a year or two of what must, on any calculation, have been the period of His birth, there *undoubtedly* did appear a phenomenon in the heavens so remarkable that it could not possibly have escaped the observation of an astrological people. The immediate applicability of this phenomenon to the Gospel narrative is now generally abandoned; but, whatever other theory may be held about it, it is unquestionably important and interesting as having furnished one of the data which first led to the discovery that the birth of Christ took place three or four years before our received era. This appearance, and the circumstances which have been brought into connection with it, we will proceed to notice. They form a curious episode in the history of exegesis, and are otherwise remarkable; but we must fully warn the reader that the evidence by which this astronomical fact has been brought into immediate connection with St. Matthew's narrative is purely conjectural, and must be received, if received at all, with considerable caution.

On Dec. 17, 1603, there occurred a conjunction of the two largest superior planets, Saturn and Jupiter, in the zodiacal sign of the Fishes, in the watery trigon. In the following spring they were joined in the fiery trigon by Mars, and in Sept., 1604, there appeared in the foot of Ophiuchus, and between Mars and Saturn, a new star of the first magnitude, which, after shining for a whole year, gradually waned in March, 1606, and finally disappeared. Brunowski, the pupil of Kepler, who first noticed it, describes it as sparkling with an interchange of colours like a diamond, and as not being in any way nebulous, or offering any analogy to a comet. These remarkable phenomena attracted the attention of the great Kepler, who, from his acquaintance with astrology, knew the immense importance which such a conjunction would have had in the eyes of the Magi, and wished to discover whether any such conjunction had taken place about the period of our Lord's birth. Now, there is a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the same trigon about every twenty years, but in every 200 years they pass into another trigon, and are not conjoined in the same trigon again (after passing through the entire Zodiac) till after a lapse of 794 years, four months, and twelve days. By calculating backwards, Kepler discovered that the same conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, in Pisces, had happened no less than three times in the year A.U.C. 747, and that the planet Mars had joined them in the spring of 748; and the general fact that there was such a combination

at this period has been verified by a number of independent investigators, and does not seem to admit of denial. And however we may apply the fact, it is certainly an interesting one. For such a conjunction would at once have been interpreted by the Chaldæan observers as indicating the approach of some memorable event; and since it occurred in the constellation Pisces, which was supposed by astrologers to be immediately connected with the fortunes of Judæa, it would naturally turn their thoughts in that direction. The form of their interpretation would be moulded, both by the astrological opinions of the Jews—which distinctly point to this very conjunction as an indication of the Messiah—and by the expectation of a Deliverer which was so widely spread at the period in which they lived.

The appearance and disappearance of new stars is a phenomenon by no means so rare as to admit of any possible doubt. The fact that St. Matthew speaks of such a star within two or three years, at the utmost, of a time when we know that there was this remarkable planetary conjunction, and the fact that there was such a star nearly 1,600 years afterwards, at the time of a similar conjunction, can only be regarded as a curious coincidence. We should, indeed, have a strong and strange confirmation of one main fact in St. Matthew's narrative, if any reliance could be placed on the assertion that, in the astronomical tables of the Chinese, a record has been preserved that a new star did appear in the heavens at this very epoch. But it would be obviously idle to build on a datum which is so incapable of verification and so enveloped with uncertainty.

We are, in fact, driven to the conclusion that the astronomical researches which have proved the reality of this remarkable planetary conjunction are only valuable as showing the *possibility* that it may have prepared the Magi for the early occurrence of some great event. And this confident expectation may have led to their journey to Palestine, on the subsequent appearance of an evanescent star or meteor—an appearance by no means unparalleled in the records of astronomy, but which in this instance seems to rest on the authority of the Evangelist alone.

No one, at any rate, need stumble over the supposition that an apparent sanction is thus extended to the combinations of astrology. Apart from astrology altogether, it is conceded by many wise and candid observers, even by the great Niebuhr, the last man in the world to be carried away by credulity or superstition, that great catastrophes and unusual phenomena in nature have, as a matter of

fact—however we may choose to interpret such a fact—synchronised in a remarkable manner with great events in human history. It would not, therefore, imply any prodigious folly on the part of the Magi to regard the planetary conjunction as something providentially significant. And if astrology be ever so absurd, yet there is nothing absurd in the supposition that the Magi should be led to truth, even through the gateways of delusion, if the spirit of sincerity and truth was in them. The history of science will furnish repeated instances, not only of the invaluable discoveries accorded to apparent accident, but even of the immense results achieved in the investigation of innocent and honest error. Saul, who in seeking asses found a kingdom, is but a type of many another seeker in many another age.

The Magi came to Bethlehem, and offered to the young child in his rude and humble resting-place a reverence which we do not hear that they had paid to the usurping Edomite in his glittering palace. "And when they had opened their treasures they presented unto him gifts, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." The imagination of early Christians has seen in each gift a special significance: myrrh for the human nature, gold to the king, frankincense to the divinity; or, the gold for the race of Shem, the myrrh for the race of Ham, the incense for the race of Japheth;—innocent fancies, only worthy of mention because of their historic interest, and their bearing on the conceptions of Christian poetry and Christian art.

Stop here and take Lesson Two Test.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT, AND THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS.

WHEN they had offered their gifts, the Wise Men would naturally have returned to Herod, but being warned of God in a dream, they returned to their own land another way. Neither in Scripture, nor in authentic history, nor even in early apocryphal tradition, do we find any further traces of their existence; but their visit led to very memorable events.

The dream which warned them of danger may very probably have fallen in with their own doubts about the cruel and crafty tyrant who had expressed a hypocritical desire to pay his homage to the Infant