

It's all in the stars

Matthew 2:1-11

There are things we hear so often, we don't listen to them. Can I focus your attention on one aspect (and that in itself is a loaded term) of the Epiphany story - that is - on the star-business. The wise men say they have seen his star in the East, and after they have talked to Herod, see the star moving towards Bethlehem, and stopping over where the child was. Do you believe that was true? Hold on for a moment before you answer. You get yourself into difficulties either way. Let's suppose for the moment you say - yes I believe it was true. Let me ask you a supplementary question. What do you think about astrology? Do you believe there is a proper study of the movement of the stars which can be used to predict things that will happen? Do you believe that the exact position of the stars at the time of your birth have an effect on the kind of person you are, your character, and the shape of your life? Now here is a problem, because I suspect that many Christians who happily accept the story of the star of Bethlehem would be very quick to say that astrology is a load of bunkum, and that the whole business of horoscopes is wrong - and very probably evil. The question in my mind for them, is how consistent is that?

The story of the Magi is cast entirely in magical terms - quite appropriately since Magi and Magic are the same root. The wise men were magicians - the philosophers, astrologers and religious diviners of the Persian empire. That at least is how Herodotus described them - and he was a whole lot nearer to their time than we are. And believing in the stars was quite common in those days, amongst peoples of all sorts of religions. The Jewish leaders quite clearly didn't reject the story of the wise men out of hand, and say that it is was sheer superstition. They didn't laugh up their sleeves at them. And there is no doubt that astrology has a respectability today which it has not enjoyed for a long long time. Encyclopaedia Britannica has five or six pages on astrology - admittedly saying it has no basis in fact, but pointing out that several perfectly respectable Indian universities still offer higher degrees in astrology. It compares quite startlingly with the entry in the first edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1769:

Astrology - a conjectural science which teaches to judge the effects and influences of the stars and to foretell future events by the situations and different aspects of the heavenly bodies. This science has long ago become a just subject of contempt and ridicule.

Really? The newspapers frequently print them - together with a lot of magazines. There are sufficiently large numbers of people interested to support several astrological magazines - and you can even buy astrological apps for your smartphone. In the 200 years since that first edition we have apparently retreated into the dark ages.

I do not see how Christians can agree that the stars have any influence on us. It seems to me to negate any doctrine of man as a free creature, able to choose good and evil, to choose to follow God or reject him, to be what God intends him to be, or to refuse to fulfil himself. It is contrary to any belief that Christ is King of

Kings and Lord of Lords. It specifically denies that Paul was right when he said that neither height nor depth, principalities or powers, or anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ. He was deliberately using astrological terminology there to say - "that is over with - done away from men's minds". Where superstition remains, faith cannot get a hold. Where superstition enters, there faith flies out. And yet - and yet - here we go each year happily saying that God led the wise men to Jesus by an astronomical phenomenon, on which they based an astrological prediction. I think for those who say this story is true, there is a real dilemma - unless you have some kind of special pleading that this bit of astrology was alright - whilst others are wrong.

But what about those who say - no I don't believe this story is true? I don't think you have it so easy either. How did those wise men get there? Did they not go at all? That would be hard to prove either way. But it is an old story, and not one that adds a lot to the story if it is merely embellishment. Matthew was writing basically for Jewish readers, so it is unlikely that his readers would have been particularly interested in something designed to show that the hopes and beliefs of the contemporary non-Jewish world were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. But in fact we do have some written evidence in Suetonius and Tacitus (who had no vested interests) that many in the near East did at that time believe that a new ruler would emerge from Judaea. And if the wise men came - something must have provoked them into making what was by any standards a long and hazardous journey. They obviously believed it was worth their while. And the likely cause for the Magi would have been something astrological. If you reject the star bit of the story - then I think you are duty bound to come up with some other more likely explanation of why those men came to be so convinced about a new King.

I can't resolve those difficulties for either group. It isn't a matter of terribly great importance anyway - but maybe there are some clues in the story. The Jewish hope for the coming of the Messiah was of a new age - the breaking in on the old of the new. When the light came, the darkness would be banished, when the truth came, false teaching would be swept away. We are familiar with those ideas from Christian teaching. I am the Light of the World. I am the Way the Truth and the Life. So when Jesus came, the new order DID break in on the new. As some have said, the gifts of the wise men may have been their tools of the trade being handed over because they were no longer necessary - they didn't need to search for truth when truth was to be found in Jesus. That may be true. Is it not possible that here we have an example of how men, using means which were entirely mistaken, nonetheless had their search for God honoured by God, in terms that they could understand?

I believe that could well be the case. Paul says he is all things to all men in order to win some. Why should God not use their mistaken beliefs to lead them to the truth in Jesus? They then did not need to mislead people any longer. And this, it seems to me, ties in with the resurgence of magical (magi-ical) beliefs in our own day - and with the apparent weight now given to astrology, horoscopes and the like - they have gained ground as belief in the truth in Jesus has receded. As the common folk-Christianity has gone, so the old magical beliefs have re-emerged. The moral of that is clear enough - if we want the true light to banish the darkness in men's minds - then it isn't a matter of looking for bright stars, but of letting the light of Christ in

us so shine before men that they see our good works, and give glory to our Father in heaven - of being so aware of our new birth in Christ that our old birth, under whatever birth sign it may be, is of comparatively little significance. It is a matter of so showing people Christ the Sun of Righteousness that the twinkling of little stars pales into their rightful insignificance once again.