

BETHLEHEM'S STAR.

WHAT IS KNOWN OF THIS SOMEWHAT MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

The Astronomical Aspects of Its Re-appearance—What Tycho Brahe Saw and Said Concerning it.

One of the popular questions of the period is about what is called the "star of Bethlehem." Every now and then a man possessing or having control of a telescope and an observatory rises to explain that he has just seen this particular luminary, and his statement appears in the newspapers. This sets correspondents agog to inquire, why they cannot have further information, and others with pen in hand proffer various information and conjecture on the subject. The star of Bethlehem, it is said, has appeared at about even intervals of a little more than 300 years. It appeared in record in the years 945, 1264 and 1572. The interval between the first two dates is 319 years, and the next interval is 308 years. The latter figure added to 1572 gives 1880, and the former gives 1891.

The inference is deemed irresistible that it will reappear within four years from time and suddenly. Every unusual flicker in the sky is accordingly hailed by expectant and ambitious astronomers as the first intimations of the marvelous return, and announced promptly, so that in case his "prophetic soul" has not misled him he will be recognized as the eminent rediscoverer.

The appearance of A. D. 945 and A. D. 1264 were vaguely recorded in the then low condition of astronomical science. But in the year 1572 the renowned Tycho Brahe was in his prime, and he wrote out a long and carefully prepared description of the phenomenon. In strictness he was not the rediscoverer, but his contemporary villagers in the place in Denmark where his observatory was situated. The circumstances are thus related:

"The appearance of the star of 1572 was so sudden that Tycho Brahe returning one evening from his laboratory to his dwelling-house was surprised to find a group of country people gazing at the star which he saw did not exist half an hour before. This was the first question. It was as bright as Sirius and continued to increase until it surpassed Jupiter, and when brightest it was visible at mid-day. It began to diminish in December of the second year, and in March, 1574, had disappeared."

In a standard work on astronomy Tycho Brahe's own description of the star is given in a condensed way, as follows: "The star lasted from November, 1572, to March, 1574, seventeen months. It was brighter than Sirius and exceeded Venus in color was successively white, yellow, red and white again." As described on the whole in the position which it occupied when discovered.

As remarked above, the intervals of the previous recorded appearances were 308, and 319 years, the mean of which, regarding the fraction, is 314 years. The elapsed period of 945 years, which fixes the first date of record, is divisible into three equal periods of 315 years, thus corresponding in the initiation of the series with the beginning of the Christian era. Arithmetically, and upon the basis of data so accepted, it is therefore demonstrated to the satisfaction of many minds that we have here the scriptural star of Bethlehem.

The account of the star is contained in the Book of Matthew. The statement is that in the days of Herod the King there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him. Herod, hearing of this, assembled the chief priests and scribes to consult with them as to where, by ancient prophecy, Christ should be born. The response of those assembled was that it should be in Bethlehem of Judea.

Herod then called the wise men into his councils and desired that they should seek out this child that he also might come and worship him, and the record is that when the wise men had heard the King's words they departed; and to the star which they saw in the east came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

An astronomical rearrangement of this statement is somewhat difficult to make. The map shows that Bethlehem is about five miles from Jerusalem and nearly due south. The statement seems to require that the star visible in the east either had previously, or upon its going forth of the wise men, gained a place on or near the meridian. From that position it might miraculously, though not astronomically, go before them in a southerly direction. To account for the star's standing still over a particular star in Bethlehem is also astronomically difficult.

Difficulties in the way of identifying the star seen by Tycho Brahe with the star described in scripture arise from other than purely astronomical grounds. It is within the knowledge of all readers that scriptural accounts of marvelous events do not in general omit peculiar and striking details in the event witnessed; and it is certainly an exception to this rule, if the star referred to in Matthew were "white, yellow, red and white again," as described on its reappearance by Tycho Brahe, that it was not made a matter of original mention.

It is to be considered that Brahe's means of observation were no better than those of the original observers, the telescope not having been invented at the date of his record. But the main difficulty as a matter of reasoning is this, that if the star has regularly reappeared at intervals of about 315 years since the beginning of the Christian era, it must on astronomical grounds have reappeared with the same period in the ages prior to that date.

The question arises why that particular appearance should betoken or certify to anything more of the supernatural than did any of the others. The difficulty is not avoided by saying that on that occasion the star ceased to move westward or near the meridian point and began to move south. Stars that appeared in former centuries can only be identified with those seen now by their position or their motion in space. Stars which recent date might doubtless be identified by the spectrum.

There is no astronomical difficulty in the proposition that a brilliant star suddenly appeared at the date of the beginning of our era, and, having vanished, again reappeared after three centuries or more. Sir John Herschel makes the following remarks on this phenomenon:

"Temporary stars are those which appear from time to time in different parts of the heavens blazing forth with extraordinary lustre and, after remaining a while apparently immovable, have died away and left no trace. Such is the star which suddenly appearing some time about the year 125 B. C., and which was visible in the daytime, is said to have attracted the attention of Hipparchus and led him to draw up a catalogue of stars, the earliest on record. Such, too, is the star which appeared A. D. 359 in Aquile, remaining for three weeks as bright as Venus and disappearing entirely. In 945, 1264 and 1572 brilliant stars appeared in the region of the heavens between Cepheus and Cassiopeia, and from the imperfect accounts we have of the places of the two earlier as compared with that of the last, which was well determined, as well as from the tolerably near coincidence of the intervals of their appearance, we may suspect them to

be one and the same star, with a period of 312 or perhaps 156 years."

Authoritative works on astronomy give account of other like phenomena. In 1604 a new star appeared in the constellation Serpentarius, which is in the southern sky. It was nearly as bright as Venus. On April 28, 1848, another appeared in the same constellation. In 1620 one appeared in Cygnus, and in the same constellation the same or another appeared in 1876. In 1886 one appeared in Corona, which was of the brightness of the pole star. In December, 1885, a star shone forth suddenly and brilliantly in the constellation of Orion and disappeared within a brief period. That of constellation Serpentarius in 1604 lasted twelve months or more, and that of Cygnus in 1670 two years. The star described by Tycho Brahe was in Cassiopeia, which is in the northern sky, but a long way from Corona and Cygnus, which are also in the northern sky. Orion is nearly on the equator. As all stars, excepting the pole star, have an apparent motion from east to west, there is nothing technically faulty in describing any of the temporary stars as a star seen in the east, though in popular speech such a phrase would be understood to mean that it was visible in sunrise.

It may be observed that Tycho Brahe, in saying that the star he saw "remained stationary all the while in the position which it occupied when discovered," and Sir John Herschel, in saying that stars of the class he described "remain while apparently immovable," do not mean what the book of Matthew signifies in saying the star there mentioned "came and stood over where the young child was." What the astronomers learn is that the star remains fixed, with reference to its position among the neighboring stars.

On the whole, in regard to the present period of expectancy, the merits of the case may be summed up by a quotation from Shakespeare:

"What is a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet. The periodical visitor, if it shall return during or before the year 1891, will be as significant and curious an object, as the one called in honor of him who accurately described it, the star of Tycho Brahe, as if called the star of Bethlehem.—Boston Advertiser.

CANKEP humors of every description, whether in the mouth, throat or stomach, and that of Cygnus in 1670 two years. The star described by Tycho Brahe was in Cassiopeia, which is in the northern sky, but a long way from Corona and Cygnus, which are also in the northern sky. Orion is nearly on the equator. As all stars, excepting the pole star, have an apparent motion from east to west, there is nothing technically faulty in describing any of the temporary stars as a star seen in the east, though in popular speech such a phrase would be understood to mean that it was visible in sunrise.

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