

# HOW MANY MAGI?

ONE of the high-spots of a Holy Land pilgrimage is surely the visit to the great basilica of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem. I have on many occasions revered the silver star set in the floor of the grotto under the crossing, and I fully accept that it does indeed mark the precise place where Jesus was born.

But what do Christians make of the lovely story of the Magi from the East who followed the star which "went before them" and "stood over where the young child was"? Surely most of us regard the story of the star as picturesque midrash or legend, not to be taken too seriously. Stars, we believe, do not commonly appear in daylight, nor do they stand over buildings.

But it seems that this simple approach is far from good enough. David Hughes, lecturer in astronomy and physics and an international authority on meteors, comets and cosmic dust, has written a striking book, *The Star of Bethlehem Mystery*, which his publishers do not hesitate to describe as "the truth about one of the greatest phenomena witnessed by man."

The opening chapters are an exercise in iconoclasm that most will find surprising. Christians from early days have believed that the Magi were three in number and were Eastern kings but Mr. Hughes will have none of this. Certainly they were Magi, but he quotes various authorities who suggest that there might have been as many as fourteen of them, that they certainly were not kings, that they might have been Zoroastrian priests, that conceivably they were "dabblers in the black arts" (and in that event,

*THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM MYSTERY. By David Hughes. (Dent, £7.95)*

according to one of his authorities, the gift of gold was a token of submission and the myrrh and incense a surrender of the tools of their trade).

If such views win wide acceptance, then somebody had better think out some new ideas for cribs, Christmas cards and school Nativity plays. At least Mr. Hughes is quite certain that

By **MICHAEL HOCKING**

the Magi really did come from the East and really were led by a star. His first five chapters make absorbing reading.

There is much about traditional dates. "Before the fourth century the celebration of the Nativity, if it occurred at all, was on 6 January, which is the Epiphany or Feast of the Baptism. It is also the feast day on which the visit of the Magi and the miracle at the wedding at Cana are celebrated." The author goes on to explain that the birthday was switched to December 25 by order of Pope Liberius in A.D. 354, associating the birth with the Saturnalia and the birthday of the sun; but neither December 25 nor January 6 have any special merit as dates. Mr. Hughes turns to a study of the stars, which alone can shed light (if that is the right word) upon the mystery.

He has much to say about the star of Bethlehem. He enquires whether it might have been a conjunction of planets, a nova, Venus, Halley's comet, a fireball or the variable star Mira; but, after a most meticulous study illustrated by clear and helpful

charts and supported by expert examination of the views of others, he comes to the conclusion that the star was in fact a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces.

Planets in conjunction can be dated. The Magi were "probably Zoroastrian priests living in Babylon," and they decided that the new Messiah of the Jews was to be born on Tuesday, September 15, 7 BC, basing this belief on what they had seen in the skies. There is more evidence about the date in, of all places, the Koran which quotes passages from the apocryphal Arab Infancy Gospel. These indicate that the birth of Jesus must have taken place before November.

The date of the death of Herod is important, and so is the date of the census. Again the facts favour 7 B.C. Mr. Hughes ends his book with the confident assertion: "This means that Jesus was born on the evening of Tuesday, 15 September, 7 B.C."

Mr. Hughes is very fair in his examination of the views of those from whom he differs; and his detailed examination of those views will greatly interest devotees of Patrick Moore's television programmes about the stars at night, and maybe those who take seriously the "What the Stars Foretell" feature of the Sunday newspapers. But it must be added that not all will find the five chapters on stars, comets and celestial phenomena compulsive reading.

The author differs from many others. Certainly he will not expect everybody to agree with all his own conclusions. Some of us will continue to reckon that the Magi were kings and were three in number, fortified by the evidence supplied by the author himself from the 3rd and 4th centuries. But Matthew had it right, it seems. They were Magi. They followed a star. Scholarship came to the manger, and not long after the simple shepherds.

# Vital challenge

THE sub-title of this book, "Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross," gives an accurate enough idea of its scope and contents. What it cannot do is to indicate the quality and character of the writing. But here, in Dr. Rowan Williams's first book, we have that rare and rather exciting event, the arrival of a genuinely new voice on the English theological scene—a voice which, we sense, will have much to say to us in the future.

Even the chapter-headings in the book suggest that we are dealing with an original and distinctive mind. The discussion of monastic spirituality from St. Anthony to St. Bernard, for instance, is headed "Acrobats and Jugglers." The deeply felt chapter on the work of St. Augustine has the title "The Clamour of the Heart."

The text itself in no way disappoints us. We are given in this book a profound theological study of certain key figures in the development of Christian spirituality in East and West. It is a text which is not always immediately easy of access; too much is packed into it for that. But it is a text which is constantly enlivened by flashes of insight and shafts of understanding.

Among those to whom the author acknowledges his indebtedness in his preface we find the name of Professor Donald Mackinnon. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. Here too is a writer who constantly confronts us with the cragginess of Christian doctrine, with the need for the Church and each believer to let himself be addressed by God's revelation in all its strangeness and its majesty. We are never allowed in this

*THE WOUND OF KNOWLEDGE. By Rowan Williams. (Darton, Longman and Todd, £4.75)*

book to forget the scandal of the Cross, never allowed to imagine that the gospel is to be accommodated to fit in with human ideas of comfort or convenience.

Thus it is that the treatment of St. Ignatius of Antioch in the first chapter of the book in some ways sets the tone for all that follows. Here is a

By **A. M. ALLCHIN**

vision of the unity of faith and action, of prayer and devotion. The life of the Christian is always "in flesh and in spirit," involving no escape from the world but rather a commitment to the world in which Christ died. It is a life in which the sacrament of the altar is not to be separated from the sacrament of the poor and dispossessed, in which the way forward into life is made known only through death.

The last two chapters of the book, which deal respectively with Martin Luther and St. John of the Cross, need to be seen in this perspective. There is much to be pondered in these parallel studies of the two contrasted but supplementary figures of the sixteenth century. There are underlying similarities which speak eloquently of the way to unity through disunity.

This is not a comfortable book. It is in a deeper sense an encouraging one, not least because its writer has no doubt about the value of the study of the Church's past for its present and future life and development. "The study of the Christian past should properly be an exercise in living more seriously in the Church and into the historical corporateness of its tradition — not passively or uncritically, but with enough commitment to find in it nourishment and hope," Dr. Williams writes in his opening chapter.

In that recovery of nerve, that re-discovery of the true value of tradition which is so greatly needed today, this challenging but nourishing study will certainly have a part.

## Shorter notices

Only a solid gold coffee-table would do justice to *Tutankhamun: His Tomb and Its Treasures* (Gollancz, £12.95). This is a pictorial record of the entry to the tomb and progression through the funerary chambers of the young Pharaoh—skilfully blending the black-and-white photographs taken during the original excavation with recent pictures of sumptuous colour and detail. The linking text by I. E. S. Edwards is brief, informative and unobtrusive. A most beautiful book.

*On the Island*, by Iain Crichton Smith (Gollancz, £4.95), is the memoir of a studious, imaginative boy living with his brother and widowed mother in a remote part of the isle of Lewis. It is a short book written with the spare significance of poetry, so that the locals and the landscape can be seen and the embarrassments and curiosity of a sensitive child felt. A lot of dourness and dislike is shot through with moments of radiance and wonder in a childhood remembered with intensity.

Relax, breathe properly, receive instruction in rhythm with accompanying Baroque music, and you will be learning by "suggestology" to become a super-person. *Superlearning*, by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (Souvenir Press, £5.95), describes some remarkable techniques pioneered in Eastern Europe to develop unused capacities of the mind: a drugless use of music, exercises and imagination to liberate the seemingly limitless potential in people to learn and perform. The facts are fulsomely presented in a style bristling with anecdote; but the methods seem logical, and the evidence convincingly in line with other current research.

*Edward Ardizzone* (Bodley Head, £12.50) is Gabriel White's affectionate but not uncritical account of the career of his brother-in-law. He sees Ardizzone's work as a form of autobiography, and the illustrations which adorn nearly every page of this attractively produced book justify such an approach — especially those from

the sketch-books and diaries. These gentle, humorous pictures, individual and instantly recognisable, provide the pleasure of cognition: a gesture, a movement, a posture, that we have seen without realising it. A captivating picture book and a helpful commentary.

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