

Book Review

Aaron Adair, *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View*, Onus Books, 2014, 155 pp., ISBN 978-0-9566948-6-7

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The subject of the Star of Bethlehem has attracted much attention and produced many theories about what may have appeared in the skies, marking the birth of Jesus as Christians believe. Details of the celestial event given in the New Testament Bible are vague leaving much room for widely varying ideas. As the Star involves Christian faith, there are valid suspicions that some explanations may have taken liberties to support religious beliefs. That idea is central to one of the more recent publications on this subject. Aaron Adair promotes his book, “The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View,” with the claim that no one can explain the Star. The Star, he says, has no historical basis nor can it even be explained as a miracle.

In reviewing books about the Star of Bethlehem, Adair finds no valid explanations. Although I maintain that there is a historical basis to the Star, I welcome any truly scholarly work that cuts through misleading pious fervor and careless historical research that pervades this subject. Examining Adair’s book, I focus on scholarship and strength of arguments used to advance his theory.

The account of Matthew reports that “Magi from the East” revealed the birth of Jesus to King Herod by observing a “Star in the East” that became known as the Star of Bethlehem. Adair finds that there is nothing believable in this story. For instance, he reminds us that magi had origins in Zoroastrianism, and that Zoroastrians dropped their interest in astrology. Thus, Adair concludes that the account is bogus because magi were not interested in astrology. This is essentially a straw man argument. Whether Zoroastrians dropped their interest in astrology and whether Roman-era magi still professed the tenets of Zoroastri-

anism are irrelevant because *magi* is a well-documented term meaning *astrologers* during Roman times.

Adair claims that most investigations disregard the controversies and ambiguities in dating the birth of Jesus. The Infancy Narratives, the biblical accounts of Matthew and Luke, describe different time periods. This fact runs counter to proponents of Biblical inerrancy or infallibility who have altered historical details to fit their religious convictions – something that Adair and I could agree on. Nevertheless, in his quest to discount *everything* in the Infancy Narratives, Adair fails to acknowledge that the stories share a common message about a celestial portent marking the birth of Jesus, which suggests an actual historical basis.

Adair employs a problematical argument style, namely that raising a question refutes the issue. For instance, trying to discredit any use of astrological research to unravel the historical facts behind the Star, Adair asks “which version of astrology?”. He then does not fully answer his question, but leaves credulous readers thinking that this is indeed an unresolvable issue. As it turns out, the astrological system is not as difficult to explain as he alleges. The widespread belief during Roman times was in so-called “Greek astrology” – an amalgamation of Babylonian and Egyptian concepts wrapped in a Greek geometrical construction namely a horoscope. The development of this astrological practice owes its origin to Greek scholars who followed in the footsteps of Alexander the Great’s conquests of Egypt and Babylonia in 331 BCE. Greek astrology is described by several primary sources with Claudius Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* being one notable example – the so-called bible of astrology.

Adair declares that no one can navigate the arcane maze of ancient astrology and use it as a historical tool to identify the Star. However, ample primary sources on Greek astrology provide adequate insight to such prognostications. For instance, we can say that the Biblical Star had to be the blatant central component of a horoscope fit for a king of the Jews. The Star would not be necessarily the visible spectacle pious believers want, but something arcane yet truly outstanding from the viewpoint of astrologers. Early Roman-era Christians, hearing about a celestial sign of a great Judean king's birth, would have believed it was for Jesus. Of course, no one can prove that Jesus was born under any particular portent.

Adair does not always use culturally relevant and timely primary sources. He cites astrological sources from times when Greek astrology did not even exist. For example, he says that the *Anuma Anu Enlil*, a set of Babylonian tablets, were compiled around 1000 BCE. Using this anachronistic source, Adair argues that the regal portent, in which the moon obscures the planet Jupiter, would have frightened Roman-era people as it may have done in ancient Babylonia. The evidence is solid that Babylonian judicial astrology and omen astrology were supplanted by Greek astrology prior to the Roman Empire. Moreover, Adair ignores how emperors and kings did prize such close conjunctions between Jupiter and the moon – a fact depicted on their coinage and cited in the horoscope of Roman Emperor Hadrian.

Similar to other researchers covered in his book, Adair confuses the debate about the Star with other anachronistic interpretations from the European Renaissance. He even throws in modern *astronomical* musings that only obfuscate what astrologers practiced at the time of Jesus' birth. Adair confuses unwary readers into thinking that astrological practices are so hopelessly varied and erratic that they are unfit for any historical research.

My interest in the Star began with noticing the astrological coinage of Roman Antioch. Commenting on these coins with the astrological sign of Aries the Ram, Adair cites a study by numismatist George MacDonald. Adair claims that MacDonald dated the coins to before Quirinius became governor (*legatus*) in 6 CE. MacDonald concluded that Quirinius issued these coins in 5-6 CE in the Actian Era that ran from September to August, which covers the commence-

ment of Quirinius' governorship. MacDonald also quoted the Book of Luke, and questioned whether these astrological coins had any connection to celestial events surrounding Quirinius' annexation of Judea. MacDonald was very specific that Quirinius issued the first in the series of Aries the Ram coins.

Adair then belabors why an astrological sign appeared on the Antioch coins. The fact is that Romans and people of the Mideast were resolute in their embracement of astrology; that is, the populace of Antioch would have immediately related to their astrological sign. Moreover, we know that Quirinius had ties to astrologers. In any case, the message of these coins was meant for the people of Antioch, not for conquered Jews who did not practice Greek astrology nor did they use these coins. Adair's discussions of the coins disregards how they helped me realize Judea's astrological sign was Aries the Ram.

Adair recognizes that key to my theory about the Star is that Aries the Ram was the sign of King Herod's realm at the time of Jesus' birth. If I am correct, any astrological event pointing to a Judean king's birth would have had to occur in Aries. Using sources attributed to the first century BCE, astrologer Claudius Ptolemy (100-168 CE) assigned Coele Syria, Palestine, Idumea, and Judea to Aries. This puts Herod's kingdom under Aries. Antioch and even Damascus were in Coele Syria, and they used Aries on their coins in agreement with Ptolemy. Thus, I concluded that astrologers would have looked to this zodiacal sign for the birth of the King of the Jews.

Adair disagrees citing how astrologers compiled their own geographical assignments differing from Ptolemy's list. Adair opines Judea must have been assigned differently because countries had zodiacal signs sometimes disagreeing with Ptolemy. This logical fallacy is an incomplete comparison. The correct complete comparison is finding Judea assigned different from Aries. In any case, I found no differences and neither did Adair.

Further challenging Judea's assignment to Aries the Ram, Adair writes, "Later in the same century, Dorotheus of Sidon goes with Gemini." Adair's footnote to this sentence has nothing to do with this statement. Neither is Judea mentioned in the cited reference. Moreover, Dorotheus' *Pentatuch* (ca. 25-75 CE) has no list of geographical assignments. Similar problem-

atical issues grow with Adair's discussion of Coele Syria where Antioch resides.

Astrologer Vettius Valens of Antioch does not mention Judea, but does come very close by telling us, "Coele Syria and *its adjacent lands*" fall under the control of Aries. Placing Coele Syria under Aries agrees with Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. This also agrees with the coinage of cities in Coele Syria. However, Adair wants to discount Coele Syria by relocating it contrary to Ptolemy's *Geography*. In fact, four other primary sources (Diodorus, Polybius, Pliny, and Arrian) also place Coele Syria adjacent to Judea. King Herod even controlled some neighboring areas of Coele Syria. Nevertheless, Adair tries very hard to redraw ancient geography: "As for Valens, his mention of Coele Syria may not refer to southern Syria but northern as it was named in the late second century CE after the reforms of Emperor Septimius Severus." This statement is misleading because Severus reigned 193-211 CE *after* Valens wrote his *Anthology* in ca. 150-175 CE. The fact stands that Valens was writing about the same Coele Syria of Ptolemy's namely in southern Syria adjacent to Judea.

Although Valens' lends support to Ptolemy about Aries the Ram ruling Judea, there was one more reference that *proves* Ptolemy correct. Roman biographer, Suetonius, gave an astrological reference to Judea that can be used to conclude Aries the Ram equated to Judea. Astrologers predicted that suffering a coup Emperor Nero (37-68 CE) would regain rule in Jerusalem. Nero's horoscope comes to us from a primary source. Moreover, this chart is verified from data about his birth time and place. Thus, we know why astrologers warned about a coup: Saturn was in square (90 degrees) to Mars. We also know where astrologers predicted Nero would regain rule: the lowest sign in the zodiacal circle of his horoscope. In Nero's horoscope, Aries the Ram occupies this position. Therefore, astrologers interpreted Aries the Ram as indicative of Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. Unbelievably, Adair writes this off as cyclical reasoning using Ptolemy's geographical assignment. In fact, if we did not have Ptolemy, we could use Suetonius' report to determine the zodiacal sign of Judea.

Adair also contests the trustworthiness of Suetonius' account about Nero, and only cites some references without explaining how they support his conclusion. Other primary sources, nevertheless, corroborate

Suetonius about Nero's prophesied misfortune. The firm belief in the astrological prediction about Nero returning to rule the East even after he died produced three documented sightings of Nero including a harp-playing imitator who fooled even the king of Parthia. These historical reports about Nero by Tacitus and Cassius Dio run counter to Adair's notion about Suetonius' reliability in this matter. Moreover, there is evidence that the astrological prediction stirred fear among Jews and Christians, who saw Nero as the Antimesiah or Antichrist, respectively.

In any case, this prediction about Emperor Nero makes an important point that astrologers did in actuality have the horoscope of an emperor, something that Adair claims to be historically unsubstantiated. "[Molnar] claims that common knowledge of Emperor Nero's horoscope was what caused people to believe he would rule in the East and conquer Jerusalem, but this is almost impossible since emperors rarely published their horoscopes for fear they may be used against them." Adair's statement runs contrary to numerous historical reports showing how the horoscopes of emperors were circulated *illegally*.

The trouble and madness stemming from access to a prohibited emperor's horoscope is a well-documented historical fact. Nero's horoscope, in particular, was no secret. We have horoscopes for other Roman Emperors as well. For instance, Adair does not mention that I illustrated a photo-copy of Emperor Hadrian's horoscope taken from a 2nd century CE source. Moreover, we have extensive accounts of how emperors suffered at the hands of enemies having access to their horoscope. For example, using Emperor Domitian's horoscope, assassins attacked him when astrologers predicted he would be weakest.

Most importantly, the horoscope of Hadrian comes with commentary by a contemporaneous astrologer, which Adair does not discuss. Antigonius of Nicea tells us how Hadrian was born just 7 days prior to Jupiter's heliacal rising. The heliacal rising of Jupiter (12 degree before the Sun) was held auspicious for a future emperor or king, but Adair disregards my evidence for *en te anatole* in Matthew meaning a heliacal rising.

In "The Coins of Antioch" article in *Sky & Telescope* (1992) I reported two dates, 20 March 6 BCE and 17 April 6 BCE when lunar occultations of Jupiter

(moon obscured the planet, the closest possible conjunction) occurred in Aries the Ram during the timeframe of Jesus' birth. Either regal portent could have been related to the Star – maybe neither as I warned. Well after that article was published I recognized the Greek text, *en te anatole*, and realized that I should have searched for a heliacal rising of Jupiter in Aries, a once in about twelve year event when Jupiter rises 12 degrees before the Sun. This happened on 17 April 6 BCE the same day as one of the lunar occultations of Jupiter in Aries. Adair does not discuss this amazing concurrence of two highly significant astrological portents each pointing independently to a royal birth in Judea.

Adair also contests my analysis of the Greek text in Matthew about how the Star “went before” and “stood over.” I theorized that the author of Matthew knew nothing about astrology and struggled with arcane jargon. Similar to the work of David Hughes reviewed in Adair's book, I claim that “went before” (*proágo*) can be a Greek homophone (similar sounding) of “went forward” namely planetary retrograde motion. Geminus of Rhodes (1st century BCE) did in fact use the same verb root (*proágountai*) to describe retrograde motion. Nevertheless, this issue is immaterial because my theory and discovery of the events of 17 April 6 BCE do not depend on this translation.

Adair dismisses my analysis of Firmicus Maternus reference to the Star, “Unfortunately, the details of the horoscope mentioned by Firmicus don't match Molnar's horoscope for Jesus, while it best matches that of Augustus Caesar.” I analyzed a passage in Firmicus' *Mathesis* (ca. 334-337 CE) describing the birth of divine and immortal persons. I showed how this was unquestionably about two births not one as Adair claims without much explanation. The first horoscope is for Augustus Caesar, 23 Sept. 63 BCE, but the second describes the horoscope for 17 April 6 BCE, ostensibly for Jesus.

Firmicus' reference to “unconquerable generals who govern the whole world” is a title held particularly by Augustus Caesar who was declared divine by the Roman Senate. In the first horoscope, Jupiter is at its exaltation that lies only in Cancer – a powerful condition for a royal birth in Augustus' horoscope. In the second horoscope, the Sun is in its exaltation found only in Aries where Jupiter was on 17 April 6 BCE. However, the Sun was in Libra for Augustus. In the sec-

ond horoscope Jupiter is in “aspect” (conjunction or in trine) with the Sun and Saturn, but not for Augustus' horoscope. Most importantly, the moon is “moving toward Jupiter” when it is “difficult to observe this,” which arguably describes the moon's motion near the Sun on 17 April 6 BCE.

Adair says in a footnote that the horoscope of 17 April 6 BCE does not have Jupiter and the Sun in trine aspect as Firmicus requires. This is incorrect. In Greek astrology “planets”, which included the Sun and moon along with five actual planets, ruled with enhanced power in four different trines – triangles of astrological signs laid out on the zodiacal circle. Three planets, “trine rulers”, were assigned to each trine. Furthermore, trine rulers could be in one sign of the trine and become omnipotent as the Sun, Jupiter and Saturn were in Aries on that date. These three planets ruled their trine of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius, a detail explained in my book with primary source references. Thus, the trine conditions for 17 April 6 BCE fit Firmicus' description for the birth of an “especially” divine and immortal person.

Finally, Adair recounts how the 1st century CE Jewish historian, Titus Flavius Josephus, did not mention the Magi's visit to Herod; therefore, he concludes that the story about the Magi must be a fabrication. This logical fallacy, known as an argument from silence, is based on the absence of evidence rather than on its existence. The fact is that no conclusion can be drawn from Josephus' lack of commentary in this matter.

These are issues I find in Adair's book. I feel that any controversy it raises lies with the book itself.