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CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

THE SETTING STAR
IN MATTHEW 2:9

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

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THE SETTING STAR IN MATTHEW 2:9

INTRODUCTION

Commentators have puzzled over the need for a star to help the magi travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Beare (1981: 80) commented, “. . . it is hard to imagine how a star could give any kind of guidance over such a short distance (ten kilometers), or how it could be imagined as standing still over a little village, and even over a particular cottage.” Similarly, a few years later Davies and Allison (1988: 246) pondered, “. . . why would one need supernatural guidance to make the six mile trek from the capital to Bethlehem? And how could a heavenly light be perceived as standing over a precise place, seemingly a particular house?” Beare did not bother to answer the questions he raised, and Davies and Allison answered their two questions by adding a third, “Or do these questions stem from an unimaginative and overly literal interpretation of Matthew’s text?” They indirectly answered their third question in the affirmative by calling attention to the very imaginative interpretations of Clement of Alexandria (died 215) and Chrysostom (407), among others, who equated the star with an angel or had the star descend until it actually stood over the infant’s head.

However, there are some likely answers to the questions raised by Beare, Davies, and Allison. But, in lieu of wild imagination and a disregard of the literal meaning of the text, a bit of controlled philological inquiry permits the text to be read quite literally and logically.

THE GREEK AND HEBREW TEXTS

The text of Matt 2:9 in the *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Howard 1995: 6) probably holds the key. The relevant part of the Greek text to be compared with the Hebrew text reads

ὁ ἀστήρ, ὃν εἶδον ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ,
προῆγεν αὐτούς, ἕως ἔλθων ἑστάθη
ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον.

The *star* which they had seen in the East
went before them, until it *stood*
over the place where the child was.

Even though the verb ἵσταναι in the Septuagint was used to translate thirty-six different Hebrew words, there is no ambiguity about the meaning of ὁ ἀστήρ ἑστάθη “the star stood.” But when a graphically similar phrase appears in Hebrew, there is unintentionally an ambiguity about the meaning the text. For example, Matt 2:9 in the *Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Howard 1995: 6–7) reads

הכוכב אשר ראו במזרח
הולך לפניהם
עד בואם אל המקום
וכאשר באו בית לחם
עמד נגד המקום אשר שם הילד

the *star* which they had seen in the East
was going before them,
until they came to the place.¹

When they entered Bethlehem
it *stood* before the place where the child was.

When הכוכב and עמד are joined as subject and verb (cf. Sir 43:10, στήσονται κατὰ κρίμα = עמד חק “[the stars]

stand as ordered”), the phrase may mean “the star stood.” But עמד can have two other meanings. It can be the cognate of Arabic *عمد* (*‘amada*) which is used with reference to the dawning of the day, as in the expression *عمود الصبح* (*‘amûdu ‘aṣṣubḥi*) “the bright gleam of dawn, the dawn that rises and spreads, filling the horizon with brightness” (Lane 1874: 2153). Were this the cognate, הכוכב עמד could mean something like “the star gleamed,” suggesting in the context of Matt 2:9 that when the magi came to Bethlehem a *burst of starlight* signaled the magi that they had reached their destination.

On the other hand, הכוכב עמד could mean that “the star set/disappeared.” This would be the required meaning were the cognate of עמד the Arabic *غمد* (*ġamada*) “to conceal” which is used (1) for *sheathing* a sword, (2) for thorns being *concealed* by leaves, (3) for wells having their water *covered* by dirt, (4) for the sky being *obscured* by clouds, (5) for a cloth put over something to *conceal* it from the eyes of another, (6) *for concealing* something with a veil, and (7) in the expression *اغتمد الليل* (*‘iġtamada ‘allayla*) “he entered into [the darkness] of the night” (Lane 1877: 2291). In light of this evidence it is reasonable to conclude that עמד, stem II, could also be used “to cover or conceal a star, to engulfed (a star) in darkness” or for a star “to set.”

Moreover, the Syriac *ܕܡܕ* (*‘āmad*) “to set, to go down” is the cognate of *غمد* (*ġamada*) and עמד, stem II, as proposed here. The *כְּבוֹאֵה־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ* “about sunset” in II Sam 3:35 and I Kings 22:36, appears in the Syriac as *ܕܢܘܕܡܘܨܘܪܐ* (*kad di‘ēmad šemša’*). The basic meaning of the Syriac root is “to plunge, to sink, to set” (used with the *sun* or *stars* or *day*), as well as “to immerse, to baptize” (R. Payne Smith 1901: 666; J. Payne Smith 1957: 416).

CONCLUSIONS

Although ὁ ἄσθήρ ἕστᾶθη can only mean “the star stood,” Hebrew עמד הכוכב can, in light of Arabic and Syriac cognates, mean (1) “the star stood,” or (2) “the star gleamed” or (3) “the star set.” Given the fact that the magi came from the East, it would be quite natural for the traditions of the magi to have been written or remembered in language of the East, namely, in Aramaic. Even though Jastrow (1903: 1086) does not cite any occurrences of עמד used in Western Aramaic for the “setting” of the sun or the stars, the Syriac (Eastern Aramaic) evidence is compelling.

With support from the Shem Tob Hebrew text of Matthew, the Hebrew *Vorlage* can be reconstructed and translated as

... הכוכב אשר ראו במזרח הולך לפניהם . . .
 כאשר באו בית לחם עמד
 נגד המקום אשר שם הילד

The *star* which they saw in the East went before them
 . . . just as they came to Bethlehem
 — right there where the child was —
 it *set*.

When the Eastern tradition of the magi was introduced into Western tradition, the original meaning of this עמד—the cognate of غمد (*gamada*) “to be engulfed in darkness” and עמד (‘*emad*) “to go down, to set”—was lost. And, as is obvious from the Greek text, the עמד in its *Vorlage* was understood as the more widely used verb meaning “to stand.”

A star somehow standing over a manger, as though it were a laser beam from infinity, appears to be the result of a mistranslation of a Hebrew/ Aramaic source. If it was in Hebrew the עמד should have been given the meaning attested in Jos

10:12–13, where the MT וַיִּעַמַד הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ . . . וַיִּרְחַח עֲמַד should be rendered “and the moon had been engulfed in darkness . . . and the sun set.”² If the source was in Aramaic it should have been understood as the Syriac ܥܡܕܐ (*‘emad*) “to set.”

The ambiguity of עמַד . . . הכוכב adds credibility to the tradition. It is most unlikely that the ambiguity would have originated in a fiction fabricated in Judean or Galilean Hebrew, in which case one would expect בא הכוכב “the star set” (the opposite of הלך הכוכב “the star went” or, in the language of Num 24:17, הָרַךְ כָּכָב, “the star marched forth”).

The ὁ ἀστὴρ ἔστ᾿ ἄθῆ “the star stood” remains problematic. But recognition of a Hebrew *Vorlage* to Matthew opens up avenues of inquiry which are very productive. Hebrew homographs have long been the bane of the interpreter; but they frequently are the key for recovering the meaning of the text.

NOTES

1. This phrase has no equivalent in the Greek text tradition. It is a misplaced phrase belonging to the end of 2:7, to be read as

וישאל מהם היטב זמן ראית

הכוכב להם עד בואם אל המקומו

he asked them well concerning the time the star
appeared to them until their coming into his territory.

The ו of המקומו came from the ו of the following וכאשר. The unrecorded answer probably set the age limit “from two years old and under,” as mentioned in Matt 2:16.

2. See Chapter X above.