

Kepler and the Star of Bethlehem

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Kepler was a famous astronomer. But like other astronomers he had a problem to find work that would give him a regular income. So he was lucky to get a job as “steirischer Landschaftsmathematiker” in Graz. One of his tasks was to write an annual calendar of weather forecasts and political developments on the basis of astrological facts. He correctly predicted a conflict with the Osmanic Empire, whether the stars or the newspapers were the cause for that is not clear. His horoscope for Wallenstein is well known as is his book *WARNUNG AN DIE GEGNER DER ASTROLOGIE* (note 1). Kepler believed in some aspects of astrology, e.g. the influence the planets played. This he deduced from his physical ideas. He neglected other aspects of astrology, e.g. the significance of the zodiac.

In 1604 Kepler observed a new star and believed that there was a connection with a special, very rare planetary conjunction. Jupiter and Saturn met three times, which is a great conjunction. Kepler speculated that the star of Bethlehem might be a similar conjunction; he recalculated it for 6/7 B.C. (note 2).

Nowadays examples of astronomical (and astrological) interpretations of the star of Bethlehem exist. The best known is Keplers’ interpretation of the great conjunction (note 3). But the interpretation of Martin seems equally excellent (note 4). Vardaman takes the Halley comet of 12 B.C. to be the star of Bethlehem (note 5). Other speculations arise from two Novae in the years 5 and 4 B.C., tabulated in sources from the Far East. But historians tell us that there is no need for a real star. The text in Matthew, book 2 is a legend. What is important in regard to the understanding of the star of Bethlehem is the “sidus Julium”, the comet which could be seen in the sky when Caesar’s funeral (notes 6 and 7) and the march of the King of Armenia Tiridates to Nero in Rome (notes 8 – 10) took place.

There was no real star over Bethlehem. All we have are interesting speculations, like those by Kepler.

Bibliography:

note 1

Johannes Kepler: *Warnung an die Gegner der Astrologie*. Kindler, München (1971).

note 2

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note 3

K. d’Occhieppo: *Der Stern der Weisen*. Herold, Wien (1977).

note 4

E. Martin: *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*. Foundation of biblical research, Pasadena, California (1980).

note 5

J. Vardaman: *Jesus’ Life: A New Chronology*. In: *Chronos Kairos Christos* Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Hrsg. J. Vardaman, E.M. Yamauchi (1989), p. 55–82.

note 6

J. Bleicken: *Augustus*. Alexander Fest, Berlin (1998), 78ff, 302.

note 7

Plinius: *Naturalis Historiae* 2, XXIII. Heimeran, (1974), pp.76.

note 8

A. Heuss: *Römische Geschichte*. Westermann, Braunschweig (1976), p. 333.

note 9

Cassius Dio: *Römische Geschichte*. V Artemis, Zürich (1987), p. 76–81.

note 10

Halley’s Comet in history. Edited by F.R. Stephenson and C.B.F. Walker (1985). London p. 53.