

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM: WHAT WAS IT?

I. Introduction

A. One of the most important aspects of the Christmas story is the Star which lured the Wise Men from their homeland to visit the Christ Child. The emblem overwhelms us; it appears on Christmas trees, cards, decorations, at nativities, and is the subject of carols. It is a prominent feature in the story of Christ's birth. Was the star a totally supernatural occurrence? Or, if it was an astral event, can it throw light on a more precise date for the birth of Christ? This has been a question of much speculation over the centuries. New light from the science of astronomy and archaeology may indeed give us insight into an event that was undoubtedly the supernatural event of all time, but it may have been accompanied by some interesting providential handiwork of the Creator.

B. Important Passages of Scripture:

1. Matthew 2:1-12. The Story of the Magi. Several things can be noted from the text:
 - a. It was a star which had *newly appeared*. It could have been something wholly supernatural, or an entirely natural phenomenon. If it was natural it could have been a new or strange configuration of planets or a combination of stars and planets. There are two other natural possibilities: a nova (or supernova), which is an exploding star that all of a sudden appears brighter, sometimes to the point where it can even be seen in the daytime, or a comet. The Greek word *aster*, can be used for a number of heavenly bodies including planets, stars, comets, or meteors.
 - b. The text seems to indicate that the object traveled slowly through the sky against the star background in an east to southwest direction because of the earth's rotation. If we assume it was a natural phenomenon we can rule out the normal movement of planets since their motion was well known. A conjunction of two or more planets could be a possibility. More likely it was a comet since a nova does not move.
 - c. It *stood* over Bethlehem. This could easily be understood if a

supernatural event were being described, but could conceivably be a comet (See below). That the star pointed out the very house is a popular tradition, but the text does not make it that specific. What it does seem to say, is that viewed from Jerusalem, it stood, or appeared to point over Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a very tiny village. It would not have been hard to find a house with a newborn.

2. Numbers 24:17 is a prophecy which states that a Star will come out of Jacob who will rule.
3. Daniel 9:20-27 is a prophecy which predicts the time of the Messiah's coming. If the seventy sevens are weeks of years, that works out to 490 years. The prophecy clock began ticking with the command to rebuilt Jerusalem in approximately the middle of the 5th Century B.C. It is very likely that this prophecy was known in the east, i.e., Babylon, at the time of Christ's birth since it was where Daniel received the prophecy. Certainly the large colony of Jews who remained there after the captivity were aware of it, and copies were possibly in the possession of the Magi.
4. Revelation 12:1,2 is a prophecy about a sign in heaven having to do with Messiah's birth. Ernest Martin believes this is a description of the constellation Virgo (the Virgin)(See his book: ***THE STAR THAT ASTONISHED THE WORLD***). According to his calculations the sun and moon were in the right positions in this constellation on September 11th of 3 B.C. In the Jewish calendar this would have been Tishri One, the Jewish New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. While his case is impressive it has major problems in that the year, 3 B.C., seems to be too late. (See the later discussion about Herod's death.)
5. In Revelation 22:16 Jesus calls Himself a *Star*.

II. There are two basic views of the Star of Bethlehem

A. The Supernatural View

1. Stated: This view holds that the Star was a wholly supernatural occurrence seen only by the Magi. In addition to seeing something, they also must of necessity have had some sort of accompanying

revelation as to its meaning. This revelation may have been prophecies from the Old Testament along with a message from an angel, and/or dreams.

2. Strengths of the Supernatural view:

- a. It can more readily account for the fact that the *star* guided them to the child. It is difficult to understand how a remote star in the sky could do this.
- b. The text seems to indicate that the star appeared, disappeared, and reappeared again. This is the reason for their rejoicing because of the reappearance of the star in Matt. 2:10.
- c. The *star*, if it was supernatural, may have been a similar phenomena to the Shekineh Glory cloud in the Old Testament which guided the Children of Israel in the wilderness. See Exodus 13:21.
- d. No one else seemed to be aware of it. If it had been a natural phenomena others would have seen it.

3. Weaknesses of the Supernatural view:

- a. The language of the original in Matt. 2:2 (literally: *We saw his star at its rising, and the star stood,*), is used exclusively in ancient literature to depict natural stellar phenomena.
- b. Most scholars believe the Magi were a priestly group skilled in astronomy and astrology who interpreted signs and portents. It is now known (from Herodotus) that at the time of Christ there were guilds of magi located in Persia and in what is now Saudi Arabia, both East of Palestine. Because of recent archaeological discoveries, scholars now favor Arabia because the gifts given by the Magi were known to have their origin there.
- c. This view seems to be based more on traditions and works of art (Nativity scenes) rather than the text. The text does not say the star gave them specific directions.
- d. There is much argument from silence. Because the text does not

mention that the star was seen by others does not mean it was not so witnessed. The text is also silent on any additional revelation they would have needed, though it is conceivable that it may have occurred this way. There just seems to be a better explanation.

B. The Natural View

1. Stated: The Magi had some sort of prior knowledge and expectation of a coming Jewish Deliverer. Being skilled astronomers and astrologers they did not fail to notice the unusual natural phenomena they observed. In fact they may have been watching for it. There were three spectacular events in the eastern skies in the years 7, 6, and 5 B.C.
 - a. Kepler, the famous astronomer of the 17th century, discovered a rare and very unusual triple conjunction (May, October and December) of two planets (Jupiter and Saturn) which occurred in 7 B.C., and again in 6 B.C. another conjunction of three planets This last conjunction of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn occurs every 805 years. This rare event occurred in the sign of Pisces which ancient astrologers called the house of the Hebrews and the sign of the last days! The planet Jupiter was regarded as the star of the ruler of the universe. Saturn was known as the planet of Palestine. If Jupiter encountered Saturn in the sign of Pisces it could mean that a notable ruler of the last days would appear in Palestine.
 - b. The appearance of a spectacular comet in the spring of 5 B.C. in the constellation Capricorn may have signaled the birth of the Jewish king and may have been the signal for the Magi to make their pilgrimage. Since this comet lasted an unusually long period of 70 days it may have taken them this long to make the trip (about right from either Arabia and Persia). After the visit with Herod the comet then re-appeared as it came around the sun. Such a comet was described and documented by the ancient Chinese. A comet can appear to stand and point because of its tail. Josephus notes that a comet appeared like a sword pointing over Jerusalem in 64 A.D. The same language and phenomena is described elsewhere in antiquity.

That the star was a comet goes back as early as Origen in the 3rd Century. He says their appearance often signaled the commencement of a new dynasty. To the mindset of the ancients, comets were portents of major changes in the established order. It could signal the death of a great king or the birth of one. One Chinese writer in 300 B.C. stated *a comet is like a broom, it signals the sweeping away of evil.*

2. Strengths:

- a. The Magi were of the same order as Daniel the Prophet. They knew from his prophecies (Dan. 9:24-27) when the Jewish Messiah would come and were looking for the signs. When they witnessed the unusual sight in the heavens they then knew that Daniel's prophecy was from God. This motivated them to want to worship the child *born king of the Jews*. This view more readily takes into account their occupation as observers of stellar phenomena.
- b. This view seems to account more for the language of the Greek text in vs. 2 which indicates it was a natural event.
- c. This view accounts for the fact that there was apparently world-wide knowledge and expectations (even in the pagan world) of a coming ruler who would bring peace to the world.
- d. While the precise date of Christ's birth is unknown presently, scholars are fairly certain He was born sometime between 7 and 4 B.C. The Bible tells us He was born before the death of Herod the Great who died in 4 B.C.
- e. The comet in the spring of 5 B.C. harmonizes nicely with all the other Biblical and extra-biblical data about the birth of Christ. For example, Luke tells us the shepherds were in their fields at night. This fits well with what we know about the weather in Palestine. This is also the time of the celebration of Passover. Not only is there a Jewish tradition that the Messiah would be born on Passover, but it makes Biblical sense if He is the antitype of the Passover Lamb. John's gospel refers to Jesus as the "Lamb of God". The date also fits well with the death of Herod, one of the best attested dates in antiquity. Josephus says he died

between an eclipse of the moon (March 12/13) and passover. It fits well with the flight to Egypt, and the return during the reign of Archelaus. It also fits well with Luke's estimate of his age when he began his ministry--*about 30 years of age*. (This may mean anywhere from 26-34). It is reasonable to conclude that Jesus was born somewhere around April 13-27 in 5 B.C. (Interesting note: He would have also died on Passover--his 37th birthday in 33 A.D.!) If Jesus was born in 5 B.C. then this year (1996) is the 2002nd anniversary of His birth ($5+1+1996=2002$. You have to add 1 going from B.C. to A.D.).

3. Weaknesses:

- a. This view does not adequately explain how the Star indicated where the Babe was to be found in Bethlehem. But the text does not say explicitly that the star indicated the exact house like in the paintings. Bethlehem was a small town; only an inquiry was probably needed.
- b. It doesn't explain the appearing, disappearing, and reappearing again. A comet, however, could easily describe the phenomena due to its orbit around the sun and it's characteristic of moving across the sky and ability to point with its tail. If the Magi, after seeing Herod, left early in the morning while it was still dark, the comet would have appeared in the southwest with its head pointing at Bethlehem.
- c. That this view involves the use of pagan astrology is probably the main objection. However, it must be pointed out that the signs of the constellation are not in themselves pagan. In fact, there are many references to them in the Old Testament (See Genesis and Job). Some scholars believe the Gospel was originally revealed to Adam in these signs but fallen men later corrupted them into the occult science (at Babylon). It is interesting to note that the word used in Revelation 12:1 *sign* is the same word used in the ancient world for the signs of the Zodiac.
- d. If the Magi departed for Palestine immediately after the comet's appearance, it does not adequately explain why Herod commanded all male babies two years and younger to be killed. The major proponent of this view, Colin J. Humphreys (See his

article: *The Star of Bethlehem, A Comet in 5 B.C. and the Date of Christ's Birth*. **TYNDALE BULLETIN**, 43.1. pp.31-56.), believes Herod may have reckoned from the first signs in the sky in 7 B.C. to cover all his bases.

- IV. Summary: The important thing to note is that God gave a sign and the Magi exhibited great faith in traveling a great distance to worship a baby who was born a King. They were not Jews, yet they bowed to His authority. They gave expensive gifts which they brought at great risk as travel in those days was not exactly safe. John said *He came unto his own and his own received him not* (Jn. 1:11). These men, however, must have been anticipating His arrival and they not only received Him gladly, they worshipped Him.

For Further Reading:

Brown, Raymond E. ***THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH.***

Hoehner, Harold W. ***CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST.***

Humphreys, Colin J. **TYNDALE BULLETIN**. 43.1 (1992) *The Star of Bethlehem, A Comet in 5 B.C. and the Date of Christ's Birth.*

Maier, Paul L. ***FIRST CHRISTMAS: THE TRUE AND UNFAMILIAR STORY.***
See Chapter 7.

Martin, Ernest L. ***THE STAR THAT ASTONISHED THE WORLD.***

Vardaman, J., and Yamauchi, E.M. eds. ***CHRONOS, KAIROS, CHRISTOS.***
What was the Star of Bethlehem? **CHRISTIANITY TODAY**, Dec. 18, 1964.