

Star Light, Star Bright

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It's seen every year at Christmas-time. In the stores, on front lawns and in our homes: the Nativity scene. A tranquil scene of our Lord Jesus Christ laying in the manger. Surrounding him are Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, animals and angels. Also present are Gaspar, Melchoir and Balthasar, the three wise men. And above the stable we see the brightly shinning star that led the wise men on their way. But just how factual is this scenario? To find out, let's look to the Bible.

The story of Jesus' birth is only documented twice in the Bible¹. The story of the shepherds and the heralding angels are found in the second chapter of Luke. The wise men and the star they followed are found in the second chapter of Matthew, and it is here that we read:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, "In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel."² Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto

¹ All Bible quotations are from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

² The prophesy that is being told to king Herod by his priests and scribes is found in Micah 5:2

him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. - Matthew 2:1-12

Now let us look at the story that is told in Luke.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." -Luke 2:8-14

By comparing these two passages, and trusting in the Word of God, which is the Bible, we can put together a more accurate portrayal of what may have happened.

In our Nativity scene at Christmas, you will remember that the wise men are bowing down before the infant Jesus with the shepherds. However, by studying the two above passages, we realize that this may not be true. In Luke, the angels tell the shepherds that they will find the babe laying in a manger, while in Matthew, the wise men find Mary with her young child in a house. Is this such a big difference? After all, newborns are often called children.

The answer is yes. The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. Luke uses the Greek word *brephos*, meaning a new-born child, while Matthew uses the word *paidion*, meaning a young child³. The shepherds were told that Jesus was born that very day in the same country, while the wise men had to travel to Bethlehem. It only makes sense that Jesus was more than a newborn by the time the wise men arrived.

And who, exactly, were these wise men? Matthew uses the word *magus* when talking about the wise men. Originally *magi* (plural form of *magus*) was associated with the Medes and the Persians. It has its beginnings with a religious man named Zoroaster, who lived around 1000 BC. Zoroaster preached the concept of one god, who he called Ahura-

³ brephos [bref'-os]: 1) an unborn child, embryo, a foetus 2) a newborn child, an infant, a babe

paidion [pahee-dee'-on]: a young child, infant

Madza (Wise Lord), who was the good force in the universe. Ahura-Madza also was a god with whom one could talk to.

Magi were priests for the Persian empire and the Zoroastrian religion. However, by the 1st century AD, the term *magi* referred to any mysterious person who had access to knowledge not normally known to most people. During this time, Magi were employed by rulers to keep them up-to-date on latest developments and for advice. They were used at times as envoys to travel to other countries, representing the royal family. The Magi would attend coronations, funerals or the opening of new cities or harbors. This was particularly true if the Magi were related to a royal family in some way.

Magi were interested in time keeping, calendars, tides, medicine, religion, alchemy and many other subjects, particularly the night-time sky. At the time, it was thought that occurrences happening in the sky could effect life on earth, and by monitoring any events gave insight into what was happening, or going to happen on earth.

Were the Magi astrologers? Not in the sense as we understand the term today. We use that word to describe the people who choose to adopt a system of prediction, regardless of our present knowledge of science. The Magi, not having sufficient knowledge of science, saw no harm in combining science, poetry, art and religion to explain and to understand the universe. To them, observing nature and making predictions were one in the same.

We understand now that observing and charting the stars is the science of astronomy, and making predictions based on that observation is astrology. Astronomy uses observations to refine ideas, while astrology uses observations to respond to fixed ideas. To the Magi, the idea that the positions of stars and planets have special meaning was not a fixed idea but one in which they were actively working on. The knowledge of the night sky was essential, and would explain why the Magi noticed a certain star that foretold of a certain birth.

In our Christmas Nativity scene, we always see three wise men. However, the Bible never mentions how many Magi there were. According to some Eastern religions, there may have been up to 12 Magi. It has always been assumed that only three Magi were present because Matthew only mentions the three gifts that they gave – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Although various names⁴ have been given to the Magi, nowhere in the Bible are their names mentioned. The names became popular around the 6th century AD. By the 9th century AD, the traditional three were firmly established, and that they represented three different races: Balthasar was Asian, Gaspar a white European and Melchoir was a black African. It wasn't until the 10th century AD that they became Kings.



⁴ In one account, the names given to the Magi are Hormizdah, Yazdegerd and Perozdh. In another, they have the names Hor, Basanater and Karsudan. In the West, tradition has them being called Balthasar, Melchoir and Gaspar.

According to Matthew, the Magi saw a certain star “in the east.” Did they follow that star to Jerusalem? The Bible does not indicate that they did. In fact, the Magi were already in Jerusalem asking people “where is he that is born king of the Jews?” when we are first introduced to them. The Magi did not start following the star until they left Jerusalem and started for Bethlehem, and this was only done after King Herod told them to head toward Bethlehem.

To understand the star a little better, we need to understand what the Magi meant when they said “in the east.” Matthew uses the Greek word *anatole*⁵, which means a rising of the sun and stars. In other words, the Magi are saying that they saw the star rising in the east. If this is the case, then what star did the Magi see?

There are several different theories on the star of Bethlehem, but the one that seems to fit mostly with the Bible was put forth by Dr. Michael R. Molnar⁶. Dr. Molnar has suggested that the star of Bethlehem, as mentioned in the Bible, was actually the planet Jupiter. As seen with the naked eye, planets look like stars. In fact, the word planet is derived from the Greek word *planetes*, which roughly translates as wandering star.

Through research, Dr. Molnar has discovered that the zodiacal sign of Aries the Ram is associated with the Jews⁷, thus it would have been here that ancient stargazers would have watched for the celestial event that would signify the birth of the Messiah in Judea. Armed with this information, Dr. Molnar extrapolated backward in time and discovered that the planet Jupiter was rising in the east in the sign of Aries on April 17, 6 BC.

When the Magi saw the royal star of Zeus (Jupiter) rising in the east, they noticed it was in the zodiacal sign of Aries. This was a powerful time to confer kingships! Furthermore, the Sun was also in Aries where it is exalted, as well as the moon being in very close conjunction with Jupiter – close enough to be an occultation (eclipse). Also present was Saturn, which meant the three rulers of Aries’ trine (Sun, Jupiter and Saturn) were present in Aries. Saturn and Jupiter were said to be attendants on the rising Sun, a regal aspect for astrologers. These precise conditions foretold a birth of a great king, and being in Aries, it would be a great king of the Jews. Firmicus Maternus, an astrologer of Constantine the Great’s time in 334 AD, described these same conditions as being those predicting a world ruler with a divine and immortal nature.

Seeing the star in the east, the Magi knew that a new king was born unto the Jews, but did not know where he was to be found. They then headed for Jerusalem, and once there, began inquiring “where is he that is born King of the Jews?”

⁵ *anatole* [an-at-ol-ay’]: 1) a rising (of the sun and stars) 2) the east (direction of sun’s rising)

⁶ Dr. Michael R. Molnar received his Ph.D. in astronomy in 1971 from the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Molnar served on teams for several space missions including the Orbiting Astronomical Observatory – 2 (1971), the Mariner 9 Mars Orbiter (1973) and did some pioneering research in the field of magnetic stars by using satellite observations.

⁷ *Tetrabiblos* (bible of astrology) of Claudius Ptolemy explained that Aries the Ram controlled the people of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Palestine and Coele Syria – lands ruled by King Herod.

Herod had been given the title “King of the Jews” by the Romans several years earlier, so when the Magi appeared asking about a newborn King of the Jews, it troubled Herod tremendously. The Magi probably knew that Herod was considered to be King of the Jews, but they also knew that the star foretold of a birth of a new King of the Jews. Note that the Magi asked “*where is he that is born King of the Jews?*” and not “*where is he who would be King of the Jews?*” They may have thought Herod was dead, or at least, not king anymore when they came to Jerusalem.

In the past, King Herod had viciously killed many people, including some of his children. We are told that all of Jerusalem was troubled with him. This may be the result that these rumors of a rival king, real or not, would cause more trouble from the feared King.

King Herod also was Jewish, being an Idumaean, from the Land of Edom; a desert region of nomads to the south of Judea. However, he probably gave little heed to the Jewish religion, for it seemed that the idea of a star foretelling the birth of a new king came to Herod out of the blue. He must have heard prophecies of this birth, but never took it seriously. He gathered his chief priests and scribes together to learn more about this subject. Having learned that Bethlehem was the supposed origin of the Messiah, he called for a secret meeting between him and the Magi. Harvesting a plot to kill this new rival King, Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem with instructions that when they find the child, they should send word back to him so that he could go and worship this child as well.



The Magi left Jerusalem probably by the western gate just north of Herod’s palace and headed south toward Bethlehem, about 5 miles away. We know it was night, because it is here that the Bible tells us that “*the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.*” Remember that Matthew uses the Greek word *anatole* that means rising, so essentially, the star (Jupiter), which the Magi had seen rising in the east, went before⁸ them and then stood⁹ still. But how can a star go before them and then remain stationary?.

To answer this question, let us do a little thought experiment. Imagine you are walking south along a quiet country road at night. To your right, in the south-western sky is the moon. As you walk along, it appears that the moon is moving along with you. As the road begins to turn in the same direction as the moon, it appears that the moon is now standing still; hovering over the direction in which you are heading. This is the same illusion that the Magi experienced.

⁸ The Greek word used here is *proago* [pro-ag'-o] meaning to go before, preceding.

⁹ The Greek word used here is *histemi* [his'-tay-mee] meaning 1) to cause or make to stand, to place, put, set 2) to make firm, fix establish

When the Magi left Jerusalem, they were heading south toward Bethlehem. In the time since the Magi had first seen the star (Jupiter) in their native country rising in the east, it had made its westward journey through the sky. By the time they left Jerusalem, the star was probably high in the south-western sky. As the Magi walked southward, they experienced the same illusion that we did in our thought experiment. It appeared that the star moved with them.

Bethlehem stands on an irregular shaped hill overlooking the road from Jerusalem. Approaching Bethlehem from Jerusalem would have involved a steep climb in a slightly south-east direction. This would put Bethlehem slightly south of the climb and increasingly west as the climb progressed. As the Magi turn toward the west in their final approach, the star would appear directly over Bethlehem, and since the Magi were now heading west-ward, the star would appear to hover over Bethlehem.

The Magi found the child with His mother and they presented their gifts. Having been warned by God not to go back to King Herod, the Magi left for their home country by way of a different route. The Bible never mentions them again.

By looking carefully at the Word of God, the Bible, and at written history and traditions, we now have a better understanding of our Nativity scene. Now we must ask ourselves if all of this really matters. Do we really need to know exactly who the Magi were, or if the star they saw was Jupiter? And do we really need to know the exact date of Jesus' birth?

We should always try to understand the Bible by studying it and learning what we can. We are told in 1 Timothy 4:15-16 to "*Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them ... Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them ...*" However, we should not let historical fact overshadow the spiritual meaning of the scriptures. Paul writes in Romans 10:17 "*Faith cometh by hearing...*" In other words, we can learn to trust God by hearing or reading the Bible and not by studying historical evidence. He goes on to say in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "*For we walk by faith, not by sight*" meaning that we do not have to see proof of the Word of God to believe in it.

It's not very important to know *when* Christ was born, but the fact that He *was* born into this world. He came into this world to be sacrificed on the cross, to shed His blood, so that we may have eternal life. The Magi followed a light to bring them to Christ, now Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12). He now is the one to light your path to salvation (Psalms 119:105). In the song *Beautiful Star of Bethlehem* by Adger M. Pace, one of the line reads "*For Jesus is that star divine, brighter and brighter He will shine.*"

And that is what it really is all about.

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