

## **What Star is this? Some thoughts on the Star of Bethlehem.**

January 6th is celebrated in most western churches as the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem. Matthew's gospel tells us that they were led on their journey by a "star." Astronomers and other scholars have been trying to identify the "star" ever since, with theories ranging from a supernova blast to Halley's Comet.

But, what do we really know about the "Star of Bethlehem?" The answer is, surprisingly little! The Magi and the Star are mentioned only in the Gospel of Matthew. The story is familiar. Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod, who was ostensibly the ruler of Galilee, but seems more of a puppet king under the Romans. "Wise men from the east" arrived in Jerusalem asking about a newborn king, claiming to have seen a star which proclaimed his birth. We are probably most familiar with the popular carol, "We three kings," which is hardly a good historical source! Since the early days of the Christian church, there have been attempts to associate the Star with some natural phenomenon, though tradition seems to have expanded on Matthew's account to claim for the star extraordinary brightness. Matthew makes no such claim; indeed, Herod had not noticed the star, so it could not have been that remarkable.

What can we eliminate from our list of possible natural phenomena? The "star" almost certainly was not a meteor shower, nor an eclipse. Periodic meteor showers occur at several times in any year and would not have been either surprising or taken as a harbinger of great events. Eclipses were unpredictable surprises to most people, but astrologers in ancient Babylon had deduced how to predict them. Further, both eclipses and meteor showers are of short duration, and apparently whatever the phenomenon was, it was persistent enough to be followed from the east.

Comets, on the other hand, were not predictable events to the ancient world, but were taken as harbingers of doom. It's not likely that an omen of evil would come to be associated with the Christmas story. An eclipse has been mentioned as a possibility (and remains part of the story, below) but would have been predictable to anyone knowledgeable of astrology.

A nova or supernova could have persisted over several months, but not over 2 years – note Herod's order to kill all male babies in Bethlehem up to two years of age, based on his inquiry of the Magi concerning when the star first appeared.

Who were the Magi? The word is the plural of Magus, and it has the same root as our word, "magic." It applies to a class of wandering court advisors and counselors, likely skilled at interpretation of dreams and astrology. Their advice was highly valued, and they were known to travel great distances to attend the birth or crowning of a king.

Matthew's inclusion of them in his birth narrative is clearly intended to give credence to Jesus' nativity, and Herod would have clearly taken their words very seriously.

One version of what "really" happened can be found in an interesting little book by Ernest Martin, "The Star that Astonished the World." Martin takes a somewhat traditional approach, associating the star with a series of planetary conjunctions in 7-6 BCE, in particular the planet Jupiter. Known in Hebrew as "Sedeq" ("Righteousness"), Jupiter underwent a series of close alignments with Venus, Saturn, and the "Royal Star" Regulus in Leo ("The Lion of Judah"). Another bright conjunction in 3 BCE, between Jupiter and Venus, may have been melded in memory with the death of Herod, supposedly in 4 BCE.

First century historian Flavius Josephus gives an extensive account of events surrounding the death of Herod. The narrative begins with a lunar eclipse, followed by Herod's death and funeral, and his son's accession to the throne before Passover. A lunar eclipse in 4 BCE on March 13 was thought to be the first event, with Passover following 29 days later. But, let's re-examine this scenario. First of all, the eclipse was only 40% total - hardly spectacular. A messenger from Rome arrived some 5 days before Herod's death, but after the eclipse (which coincided with some political executions ordered by Herod). Second, Josephus gives an extensive account of the funeral "celebration" which makes this seem even less likely. A funeral procession carried the embalmed body some 25 miles to the burial site. Walking in bare feet, as required in mourning, and covering only 1 mile each day. We are told that word of Herod's death had reached Rome, and a Roman legate was dispatched to protect the royal treasury before the crowning of his successor. The legate apparently was present at the installation of Herod's son Archelaus, who also had time to issue several decrees before the Passover. Martin estimates that nearly 10 weeks would have been required for all the events surrounding the death and funeral to be accomplished, not a mere 29 days if the 4 BCE scenario is to be believed.

So, when did this all happen? There was a total lunar eclipse on January 10, 1 BCE, 12 ½ weeks before Passover. The War of Varus, known to have followed Herod's death, can be dated to 1 BCE as well. So, if we move Herod's death to 1 BCE, we should look for the Star in 3-2 BCE.

2 BCE marked the 25th year of Augustus' rule, and the supposed 750th anniversary of the founding of Rome. To honor the emperor, the people were to rise "as one" and name Augustus "*pater patriae*" - "Father of the Country." In order to make this happen, a census was ordered! And ..

Jupiter was in conjunction with Regulus in September. And the conjunction was repeated twice in February and May of 2 BCE. In June of 2 BCE, Jupiter and Venus made a conjunction so close that their disks appeared to merge into a single, spectacularly bright star. Also on 11 September, 3 BCE, the Sun was in the constellation Virgo, on the day marking the beginning of the Jewish new year. And ... The words in the Bible, which tell us that the Star "stopped" over the site where the Magi found Jesus, can also be translated as the astronomical term "stationary." Jupiter was stationary on the 25th of December (!)

and would have been due south as seen from Jerusalem - directly over Bethlehem, 5 miles to the south. (The date is likely a coincidence - the Christmas holiday was timed to counterbalance the pagan festival of Saturnalia, not to commemorate a birthday.)

A 1999 book by astronomer Mark Kidger, "The Star of Bethlehem," presents a different argument, again suggesting 4 BC as the time of the star. Chinese and Korean court astrologers reported a "guest star" near the constellation Aquila on the same date in either 4 or 5 BC - one of the records is apparently a transcription error - which persisted for over 70 days visibility. As seen from Babylon or Persia, this guest star would have been first seen after midnight "in the East." If these astrologers had been primed by the conjunctions of 7 - 6 BC to look for a sign, this would have been something of which to take note. Perhaps it would be sufficiently noteworthy to pack up and go searching for a new King of the Jews, presaged by the planets and confirmed by this "new star."

An overland journey from Persia would be just possible in 70 days, if they were already primed to leave. Such a journey from Babylon would take less time, allowing for preparations after first sighting the star. By the time the Magi arrived at Jerusalem, the star would appear to the south, just because of the normal shift in constellations with the seasons. Bethlehem lies due south of Jerusalem, so they might think of the star going before them, and "stopping over the house where the Child was."

Which scenario is correct? I doubt we'll ever really know. In a real sense, it doesn't really matter! The real story of Christmas and Epiphany is about contact between humankind and the transcendent. For people of faith, it is about the arrival in history of one known as the Son of God. The details pale before the meaning of that event.

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