

Chapter 10 - The Star

The star of the Magi has been discussed in hundreds of publications. That there was a star of extraordinary brilliance we are certain. It was that star that alerted the Magi to search the ancient scrolls for its significance. That the star evidently disappeared and reappeared when the Magi were about to leave Jerusalem for Bethlehem is also certain from the biblical story. What seems most amazing is that the Star traveled, or appeared to travel before the Magi, until they arrived in Bethlehem, where it then stood still over the place where the young child was. (Matthew 2:9) Attempts have been made by various scholars to debunk the star as a myth. Other equally scholarly works both Christian and Jewish have tried to explain the appearance of the star from an astronomer's perspective. These studies are interesting "asides" to the story but hardly necessary to "prove" that there was a star of Bethlehem. If we had to rationalize and prove scientifically every miracle of the Bible there would be no more miracles. If we would succeed in explaining scientifically what the star was and how and when it appeared we would be taking some of the miracle out of the most miraculous event in human history. For those with a scientific bent it might be interesting to read some of these theories and perhaps they can be of some use in apologetic discussions with unbelievers. Alfred Edersheim presents a lengthy treatment of this topic in his work *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. I recommend it to you. You can find it in its entirety in our Online Electronic Library.

The Mysterious Star of Bethlehem

The story of the birth of Christ is filled with mystery and awe. Among those mysteries none is so awe inspiring as the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem that led the Wise Men to the Christ Child. Through the years many have taken in hand to explain, or discredit the star as either non-existent, or a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is not our intent to explain-away the star of Bethlehem but to show that it was not a localized event viewed only by the wise men. Recognizing that many today have dismissed the Star of Bethlehem as a myth, we find it important to show the scientific evidence to support the appearance of the star.

Genesis 1:14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

Numbers 24:17 I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

Matthew 2:2 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...7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared... 9 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. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

Stars themselves have always been an awe inspiring mystery. Throughout the eons of time men have looked to the stars and presumed they held the secrets of future events. Perhaps that comes from the fact that God created the stars, and said "Let them (the lights of the firmament) be for signs...seasons... days and years." (Genesis 1:14) Wise men have studied the stars, measured their travel and distance, deciphered their composition (planet or star), and watched their changes.

Astrology and astronomy have developed as sciences. Astronomy is the scientific study of the heavens and celestial bodies, while astrology is the mystical, religious, superstitious study and projection of fortune-telling from the position of the stars in the heavens. We make the division between astronomy and astrology but it seems apparent that the ancients did not. Both superstition and science were at the core of stargazing. God condemns astrology as a form of witchcraft.

Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee. - Isaiah 47:13

In fact it was difficult to draw a clear line through science and superstition in biblical times. Science in any of its forms was not purely science. It always had its roots in some religious belief or superstition. Even the renowned Jewish scholar of the first century, Philo of Alexandria, stated that astronomy/astrology was an integral part of the first century education. He interpreted Genesis 1:14 as legitimizing the use of stars for "timely signs of coming events" since they were created "for signs." All cultures believed that the stars conveyed messages, or portents of things to come.

The full blown development of astrology as a form of witchcraft is well known even in our own day and age. Astrology divides the night sky (the heavens) into zones, or the zodiac, (the twelve constellations that the sun passes through during a year - Pisces, Capricorn, Taurus, etc.) by which daily horoscopes are divined. Scientists, that is, true astronomers, will tell you that there are 24 constellations, not 12 as astrologers purport.) This form of superstition is astrology, not astronomy, and is witchcraft, not science. *

*<http://www.griffithobs.org/I PSRealConst.html>

Astronomical Evidence

The great astrologer Kepler, in 1604 AD, attempted to show that the star of Bethlehem was the massing of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, which occurred only once every 805 years. He tried to prove that it was a portent of great men or great events in history such as the birth of Moses, Isaiah, Christ, Charlemagne, and the Reformation. * Unfortunately his dates for such an event were two years before Christ, thus an inadequate explanation of the Star of Bethlehem.

For Kepler to presume that the Wise Men traveled to Jerusalem simply because of the BC 7 conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn would be speculative. We must look at the whole of what the Wise Men were seeing in the heavens. There were three distinct and significant celestial events which for the Wise Men were incontrovertible signs of a major earthly event.

Sign 1: THE TRIPLE CONJUNCTION OF JUPITER AND SATURN IN BC 7.

In May, October and December of BC 7 there was the highly unusual triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces. Such an event only occurred once every 900 years. That year it happened three times!

Sign 2: THE MASSING OF THREE PLANETS IN BC 6. (Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars)

Three planets came together which only occurred every 800 years. This time they came together in the constellation Pisces, thus indicating to the Wise Men another portent of a significant earthly event. Pisces indicated for the Wise Men that that event was to be in Israel.

Sign 3: THE APPEARANCE OF A COMET IN THE SPRING OF BC 5.

An unusual comet appeared in the east in the constellation Capricornus, which to the Magi signaled the rapidly approaching birth of the significant king in Israel. This was a "tailed" comet. The Chinese kept excellent records of celestial events and marked the date and duration of the appearance of this star. They marked it as occurring on March 9 to April BC 6 in 5, continuing in the sky for 70 days. It is the only tailed comet on record near that time.

A Comet

Comets were associated with both calamities and great events alike. The third century historian, Origen, argued that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet. He stated:

"The star that was seen in the East we consider to be a new star... partaking of the nature of those celestial bodies which appear at times such as comets... If then at the commencement of new dynasties or on the occasion of other important events there arises a comet... why should it be a matter of wonder that at the birth of Him who was to introduce a new doctrine... a star should have arisen?" 19

The overriding fact that is often overlooked in this triple sign of Christ's birth is that Herod inquired diligently of the Wise Men concerning the timing of the star's appearance. Had it been only the one star that hinted at Christ's birth Herod would not have ordered the murder of children under two years of age. But if they had described the triple sign,

BC 7, BC 6, and BC 5, then Herod would have good reason to destroy children born in Bethlehem from BC 7.

The comet theory gives us the best scientific evidence of the existence of the Star of Bethlehem. It meets all the criteria of both biblical evidence, historical timing, and astronomical data. According to the biblical record of Matthew chapter two, the star had three distinctive characteristics:

- 1.It was a star that newly appeared in the heavens
- 2.It was a star that traveled through the sky originating in one part (in the east, the morning sky) and concluding in another part of the sky (in the south west, the evening sky).
- 3.It appeared to go before the Wise Men and stood over Bethlehem where they inquired of the birth-child.

As we have already established, only the comet of BC 5 would fulfill such criteria. The Chinese recorded no other astronomical event that would approximate it. The star (comet) appeared suddenly, as all comets do. It lasted 70 days, more than enough time for the Wise Men to travel the 550 miles from Babylon on camels to arrive in Jerusalem to inquire after the King. It apparently was not visible for a time, perhaps because of cloudy skies, then appeared again after the Wise Men were told that the King would be born in Bethlehem. Its appearance was as a star that "pointed" and "stood over" the city of Bethlehem. Josephus, the famed Jewish historian, described Halley's Comet of 12 as heralding the death of Marcus Agrippa and stated in similar language as the New Testament account of the Bethlehem Star, "the star called comet stood for several days over the city [Rome]" and again described the comet of 64 AD as, "a star, resembling a sword, stood over the city." So we can conclude that a comet perfectly fits the description of the Matthew narrative. *<http://www.crystalinks.com/bethlehem.html>

Assigned Reading::

Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Book 2, Chapter 6, "Nativity"

Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, The Magi

Other Resources:

*<http://www.griffithobs.org/IPSRealConst.html>

*<http://www.crystalinks.com/bethlehem.html>

http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/p_greetham/wisemen/home.html

<http://www.eclipse.net/~molnar/>

Star Date?

Much confusion arises over the date of Christ's birth due to the errors in our calendar. If you will remember from our study of the Intertestamental Period, in 527 AD, Dionysius Exiguus, a monk, originated our calendar arbitrarily fixing the birth of Christ as 1 AD, as Anno Domini, the year of our Lord (hence AD). His guesstimate of Christ's year of birth was wrong. We know that because of historical records of Herod's death, which occurred one year after the Star of Bethlehem appeared, placing that date as BC 4. Putting that together with the appearance of the Comet in the Spring of BC 5 we know that this would have been the exact time of Jesus' birth.

The Quirinius Question

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)"

The actual date of Christ's birth has been disputed. The main argument is that Luke made a grave error in referring to Quirinius when he said, "...this first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." The argumentative historians say that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Christ's birth because his governorship did not begin until ten years later. Therefore, they conclude, Luke misspoke and did not know his history. Historians revel in that they have found ancient documents that record such a census in A.D. 6 (Acts 5:37) but no record of such a census in 4 B.C.

To such an argument we must respond. His full name was Publius Salpicus Quirinius. The King James Version renders his name "Cyrenius" which is a transliteration of the Latin into Greek, then to English.

Quirinius was a notable Roman soldier who rose through the ranks to political power without the aid of wealth or family heritage. Dates are vague but it seems that he ruled as proconsul about 15 B.C. Between 12 B.C. and 5 B.C. he was engaged in military actions particularly in the mountains of Pisidia.

The problem comes when Luke, himself a notable historian, states that in 6 B.C. Quirinius was governor of Syria. It is common historical knowledge that Quintilius Varus was governor of Syria in BC 7 - 4. There are now notable scholars who believe there is

evidence that Quirinius was governor of Syria during two periods of Roman history, an early date and the later date mentioned by Gamaliel in Acts 5:37.

Two Possibilities

There are two possibilities set forth by great scholars.

1. The one asserts that Luke's language here leaves room for various interpretations.

"This census was first taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." We know Quirinius was governor of Syria in 6-9 AD. Roman census took a long time. They usually were spaced fourteen years apart. The census was due in 7 B.C. Varus would have just assumed his new office as an untried governor. He was a failure as a soldier having lost three legions in the Teutoburger Forest in Germany - one of the most devastating fiascoes of Roman military in that century. Herod at the same time had lost favor with Augustus. The time of a census was not a pleasant time for the Jews since the priest looked on it as against the will of God. (Remember the results of David numbering the people.) It would not have been unusual for Augustus Caesar to assign this dangerous and potentially explosive job to a tried and true military officer like Quirinius. Seeing that Quirinius eventually was given the post strengthens this argument.

We must, however, admit that there is no physical evidence of this taking place. It is all speculation based on Luke's precision as a historian. Barring any new archeological evidence, we must wait in faith knowing that all other arguments against Luke's accuracy have been laid to rest by later archeological finds.

2. Another explanation is proffered by the esteemed historian and writer Alfred Edersheim. He argues from the accuracy of Luke's historical references and from the wording of Luke 2:2 that the census which was begun in the year of Christ's birth was not effectively completed until after Herod's death when Quirinius was governor of Syria and after Judea had become de facto a Roman province. (Edersheim p.128)

The Date of December 25

We have already covered the year of Christ's birth in a previous lesson, so we will not repeat that here. (See lesson 1, Intertestamental Period) Traditionally, Christmas is celebrated on December 25. How did we choose this date, and is it a tenable date for Christ's birth?

The first mention of any observance of Christ's birthday appears around 200 AD. The day of December 25 was first mentioned in 336 AD. Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate it on January 6. We may never know for certain the exact month and day of Christ's birth because the bible does not give us that information. Edersheim believes there is no real reason to question the December date. Here is his reasoning.

"A curious piece of evidence comes to us from a Jewish source. In the addition to the Hegillath Taanith (ed. Warsh. P. 20a) the 9th Tebbeth is marked as a fast day, and it is added, that the reason for this is not stated. Now, Jewish chronologists have fixed on that day as that of Christ's birth, and it is remarkable that, between the years 500 and 816 AD the 25th of December fell no less than twelve times on the 9th of Tebbeth. If the 9th of Tebbeth, or 25th of December, was regarded as the birthday of Christ, we can understand the concealment about it. Comp. Zunz, Ritus d. Synag. Gottesd. P. 126." (Edersheim, p.132)

A Spring Date

In our discussion of the Star of Bethlehem we have already made references to the possibility that the Lord was born, not in the winter as Edersheim speculates, but in the Spring of the year. Evidence for this is supported by the date of the appearance of the Star as reported by Chinese astrologers, and by the evidence of Herod's death, one year after that event. Which, if you remember, took place at or around the Passover.

Sources and Recommended Reading:

(It is not necessary to buy these books.)

Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 1, 3, 4 Merrill C. Tenney, editor, Zondervan, 1975

Fausset, Andrew. R. , Bible Encyclopedia and Dictionary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, NIV Study Bible,

Edersheim, Alfred, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Hendrickson Pub., 1993.

Edersheim, Alfred, Sketches of Jewish Social Life, Hendrickson Pub., 1994.

The New Bible Dictionary, Douglas, J.D. editor, Eerdmans Pub. Grand Rapids, 1962

The Online Bible electronic software.