

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, scholars have assumed several possibilities: a conjunction of planets, 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 it could conceivably be a comet (See below). That the star pointed out the very house is a popular tradition, and a recent book (Nicoll) demonstrates with illustrations exactly how that would have been possible.
 2. Numbers 24:17 is a prophecy which states that a Star will come out of Jacob who will rule. There is a Jewish tradition that the star was a comet. Some English translations render it: *a comet will arise from Israel... (NEB, REB)*.
 3. Isaiah 9:2, the great Messianic passage notes: *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.*
 4. 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, and, at the time of Christ's birth, there was still a large number of Jewish diaspora still living in the area that was once ancient Babylon. It is highly likely that scrolls of the OT including Daniel were in the possession of the Magi at that time.
 5. Revelation 12:1,2 is a prophecy about a sign in heaven that seems to announce the precise time of Messiah's birth.
 6. 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. 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 could account for the fact that the *star* guided them to the child. It is difficult to understand how a remote or stationary star in the sky could do this.
 - b. 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.
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. With this view there are many assumptions resulting in an 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: Two possibilities

1. That the Magi had some sort of prior knowledge and expectation of a coming Jewish Deliverer is assumed. 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 (see Daniel's prophecy). There were three spectacular events in the eastern skies in the years 7, 6, and 5 B.C. in which two or more planets were in conjunction (close together). This is the current popular view and is seen in various planetariums around Christmas time. 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.
 - a. Strengths of planet conjunction view: It certainly was spectacular and it would not go unnoticed by a keen observer of the heavens. It was a common view in antiquity that heavenly bodies influenced human behavior and foretold events such as the death of a king, etc.
 - b. This view, however, has many weaknesses.
 - (1) In the text the word "star" is singular. The ancients would not have confused a conjunction as a singular star.
 - (2) It doesn't readily explain the appearing, disappearing, and reappearing again.

- (3) 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. Hence the sin of astrology is using the signs of the Zodiac as a means of divination.
2. The appearance of a spectacular comet in 7/6 B.C. seems to offer the best solution. It originally appeared without the tail in the abdomen of Virgo. When the new astral body moved lower toward the birth canal of Virgo the Magi would have seen this as the time of birth (Oct. 20, 6 B.C.). Nicoll believes that the Magi would have departed toward the west soon after as they followed its track west and southwest across the heavens. Since Babylon was about 550 miles from Jerusalem it probably took them about two months to get there (camel express). At some point, as they were nearing Jerusalem, the comet, i.e., star, disappeared as it went around the sun. After making inquiry about the birth of this child with the scribes of Jerusalem, they were informed from OT prophecy (Micah) that the event would take place in the village of Bethlehem. Finally, the star appears again (as it came around the sun) resulting in much rejoicing, and as they head to Bethlehem the tail of the comet points them to the house where the newborn resided. That a comet can point is noted by Josephus who wrote about a comet which appeared like a sword pointing over Jerusalem in 64 A.D. The same language and phenomena is described elsewhere in antiquity.
- a. Strengths:
- (1) The Magi were from the same guild 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.
 - (2) This view seems to account more for the language of the Greek text in vs. 2 which indicates it was a natural event.
 - (3) 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.
 - (4) A comet 7/6/ B.C. harmonizes nicely with all the other Biblical and extra-biblical data about the birth of Christ. 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 26-36). (Scholars are fairly certain that Christ was born before 4 B.C. Why! Because the Bible tells us He was born before the death of Herod the Great who died in April of 4 B.C. which is one of best attested dates in antiquity according to Josephus, who tells us an eclipse of the moon occurred one month before his death.
 - (5) Important early Christian sources testify to a comet. *The Proevangelium of James* written in the middle of the 2nd Century describes the star befitting a comet. Origen, writing in the first half of the 3rd Century refers to it as a *hairy star*, another way of describing a comet.

IV. Summary and Conclusion:

Nicoll believes the Star of Bethlehem was one of the greatest phenomena ever seen in the heavens. It was so bright it could be seen in broad daylight, and so bright other stars could not be seen at night. The prophet Isaiah was right: *The people had seen a great light.* Jesus in John's Gospel refers to Himself as *The light of the world.*

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 probably 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). What irony! These men, however, must have been anticipating His arrival and they not only received Him gladly, *they worshiped Him.*

The story of the great Christ Comet teaches us something about God's marvelous providence. This comet, and all the other heavenly bodies involved, were set in motion at the very beginning of Creation! Because of its brightness it would certainly seem to be its first orbit around the sun. It's not conceivable to me that it just disappeared after that. It must still be out there somewhere! Nicoll speculates that it may come again and be just as spectacular. He writes: *Could there be a clearer example of God's mastery over the Cosmos than the celestial events that marked the birth of Jesus? The comet's size, shape, and chemical composition were all tailor-made for this occasion. Its orbit had its programmer's fingerprints all over it. In fact, the plan for the messianic sign was already in motion at the point that the solar system came into existence, and the precise moment of the Messiah's birth was firmly established then, guaranteed by the laws of physics. After all, the comet, the planets, and the Moon all had to be in their appointed locations within their orbits, as did the Earth, for only then could the Sun, the stars, the constellations, and meteoroids be in their proper positions. Moreover, Earth's revolution had to be in perfect sync with comet's for this wonder to unfold. ...*

The comet likewise beckons all humans to fall to their knees, doing so with greater awe than the Magi, reflecting a deeper appreciation of what God did to authenticate Jesus as the Messiah on the occasion of his birth—and how he did it. (p. 292)

Truly *The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Ps. 19:1ff*

For Further Reading:

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

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

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.***

Nicholl, Colin R. ***THE GREAT CHRIST COMET.*** The most definitive study available.

Vardaman, J., and Yamauchi, E.M. eds. ***CHRONOS, KAIROS, CHRISTOS.***