

## THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM



Matthew 2:1 "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'"

At the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew, it was not uncommon to believe that important historical events were marked by astronomical signs in the sky. Virgil reported that a star guided Aeneas to the place where the city of Rome was to be founded. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, spoke of a star that stood over Jerusalem for a year at the very time of the great fall of the city of David in 70 A.D. Cicero reported a

great light in the sky that presaged the birth of one who was to be a great peril to Asia, namely, Alexander the Great.

So, if we take this gospel record as a historical fact, how do we explain this story of the Star of Bethlehem? Like many of you, perhaps, I once attended during Christmas a show at my local planetarium to explain the Star of Bethlehem astronomically, which included one of the three usual explanations. For since the days of Johannes Kepler in the seventeenth century, there have been careful astronomical studies of peculiar celestial phenomena in the decade before Jesus' birth, looking for the Star of Bethlehem. Kepler's own suggestion was a supernova or a 'new star' which involves a faint or distant star in which an explosion takes place that for a few weeks or months gives out great light, sometimes even brighter than the moon. About a dozen novae are discovered each year, but ones visible to the naked eye are much rarer. And unfortunately, there is no historical record of a nova or supernova at the time of the birth of Jesus. Thus, Kepler's faithful suggestion of a 'new star' is purely speculative.

Some astronomers have suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet. Comets move in regular but elliptical paths around the sun. In the distant part of their orbit, they cannot be seen from earth, but when they come close, they can be striking, especially if they develop a luminous tail of gases and dust.

The history of the comet named after Edmond Halley has fascinated astronomers from early days and is now recognized as occurring every 77 years. Thus, we know that Haley's comet was visible in the years 12 to 11 Before the Common Era. But this hypothesis for the Star of Bethlehem faces several serious criticisms. First, a comet is not a star, as the Gospel records. Secondly, comets were usually thought to presage catastrophe. And thirdly, the date of 12 B.C.E. is years before the date of 6 B.C.E. usually assigned for Jesus' birth. Still some historians have suggested that Matthew's account is historical, for it has simply reinterpreted by association with Jesus an astral phenomenon known to the author to have occurred in the general time of Jesus' birth.

The third possibility of our showing at the planetarium is a planetary conjunction, and this is the one most often suggested as the Star of Bethlehem. Jupiter and Saturn are the slowest of the visible planets in their orbit around the sun. And in the course of these orbits the two planets pass each other every twenty years. A much rarer occurrence is when a third planet, Mars, passes during or shortly after the conjunction of the other two. Kepler observed this three-planet conjunction himself in October 1604. He calculated that this conjunction happens every 805 years and thus it would have occurred in December, in the year 7 to 6 B.C.E., the time

supposed for Jesus' birth. Still, we have no contemporary evidence suggesting that such a conjunction would have been thought of as a 'star' or attaching any particular astrological effect to it. More problematic to me, however, is dating Jesus' birth in December. As I noted on Christmas Eve, most biblical scholars have agreed that Jesus' birth would have been in the spring. The association with December only began when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century, as Christians took over the ancient Roman festival called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, or the birthday of the invincible Sun, a festive pagan celebration of the Winter solstice.

Thus, this planetary conjunction in December would not have occurred during Jesus' birth. Indeed, if we are going to be scrupulous in discerning the facts of this matter, then the whole story of the Three Wise Men following a star is liable for dispute. The very idea that a new star suddenly arose in the East, then stopped, appearing over Jerusalem, but then after the Wise Men consulted with King Herod, moved south again to appear over Bethlehem, and which finally came to rest over a particular house there so that the Wise Men could find the babe --- that would have constituted a celestial phenomenon unparalleled in astronomical history; and yet it received no notice in the records of the times. Moreover, I have challenged my own

children to go outside any night and pick any star in the sky and then tell me which house it is over. That simply makes no sense.

The Gospel narrative has Herod then assembling the priests and scribes for consultation as to where the Messiah was to be born, which betrays no awareness of the bitter opposition that existed between that King and his priests, nor of the fact that the Sanhedrin was not at his beck and call. It is also difficult to imagine that a suspicious Herod made no attempt to have the Wise Men followed in their simple five-mile journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. One can also imagine the impression that exotic Kings from the East with royal gifts and entourages would have made in such a small village as Bethlehem; and yet shortly after the Holy Family flees, Herod's spies cannot discover which place they visited. Nor is Herod's slaughter of all the male children beneath the age of two ever mentioned in Josephus' detailed historical accounts of the horrors of Herod's reign. That there was great consternation in all Jerusalem over the news of the birth of the King of the Jews in Bethlehem, as reported in the Gospel, are facts that seem unknown or unremembered years later when the people of Nazareth were surprised at Jesus' pretensions (Mk. 6.1-6) and when the people in Jerusalem do not know where Jesus was born (Jn. 7.40-2). And there is no confirmation of any of these details elsewhere in

the Gospel of Matthew, or in any of the other Gospels, or in any of the other books of the New Testament. There is no other mention of the appearance of the star, or of the arrival of the Wise Men, of the intervention by Herod, or of a massacre of the holy innocents, or of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, anywhere in the rest of Christian Scriptures.

The legend of the Three Wise Men and the Star of Bethlehem is, therefore, understood by many as simply a popular and imaginative exposition of the Scriptures for the promotion of faith and piety, a practice that the Jews call Midrash. Generations of Christians over the centuries have continued such popular and imaginative expositions of this and other Christmas stories. We do the same today. There is, for instance, no mention in the Gospels of an ox and a donkey at the manger, but every manger scene has one. Why? Their presence in the story is the result of midrash, of filling in the details of a story later, often by relying upon other Scriptural passages to provide context; in this case a single verse from Isaiah (1.3), where we are told that the ox and the ass know their master, which led Christians to assume there was an ox and an ass in the stable where Jesus was born. Similarly, in subsequent versions of Matthew's story of the Wise men, they become Kings as suggested by the words from the Psalm, "where the kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of

Arabia and Saba offer gifts. All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service." Likewise the number of Wise men, unspecified by Scripture, is soon set at three, by the number of gifts mentioned --- and the ages of these now Three Kings are spread out to represent the three ages of Man (one is often depicted as old, one young, one middle-aged), and their ethnic origins to represent the three Races of Mankind descended from the three sons of Noah (one Caucasian, one African, one Asian), and their gifts are understood to symbolize Jesus as King, God, and suffering Redeemer. Thus, the Wise Men have come to represent for us the quest of all peoples of all ages for a Savior. Are we being naive in thinking so, in creating and expanding this legend? Perhaps, but it is a valid hermeneutic instinct and a meaningful story.

In the end, it seems to me that what is important is not what we believe about the Star of Bethlehem, but what we believe about Jesus, that he was worthy of the adoration of Kings, that Gentiles could come from afar and worship him too, that all people of all ages are drawn to him. These matters of faith are far more important to me than mere matters of historical or astronomical fact. This story is only a peripheral event in the life of Jesus, but it was used by Matthew, and by us, to express some sense of the mystery of that infant, to reveal a greater truth about Jesus that might otherwise go unacknowledged. Jesus

is no less worthy of our adoration and worship if the story of the coming of the Magi and the star is unhistorical. For the focus here is, and must always be, on Jesus. It is He that we celebrate and commemorate today, and not the Wise Men or their Star. AMEN.