

Understanding the Christmas Star

By Stephen Milton

Each December, stars are placed on top of Christmas trees, in remembrance of the light that shone above Bethlehem. The star only appears in Matthew's gospel, suggesting that it wasn't a key part of the Christ story for the other Gospel writers. So why does the star get a mention at all?

The answer lies in seeing the stars as the ancients saw them, not as we do now. We need to forget about stars as fiery nuclear furnaces, and return to a view of the stars that prevailed before science was born. As we'll see, that star was a kind of coded signal, delivering a message that would have been clear 2000 years ago, but which we miss if we think of stars in scientific terms.

We need to start with the Gospel account. Matthew describes how three Magi arrive at Herod's court, having followed the new star each night. Herod and his advisors have not heard of the star, but claim they want to meet the new Messiah the star heralds. The Magi take their leave, and continue to follow the moving star until it stops over Bethlehem. They proceed to find the baby Jesus, and give Him their gifts.

Before we look into what that star meant to the people of Judea, let's see if there's any scientific evidence for the star's existence. The Bible tells us that it is new, and that it moved. Reams of articles and books have been written trying to establish what real astronomical object could have hung

over Bethlehem, and even moved, night by night, to lead the three Magi to the town of Christ's birth.

So far, a few candidates have been found, but each has its problems. Christian art makes it seem like there was a huge new star in the sky, suggesting a super nova. But there's no record of such a bright light in any of the ancient records. There was a comet, however, in 5 B.C.E. , which was even noticed by the Chinese, half way across the world. It stayed in the sky for seventy days, long enough to be noticed by Magi coming from the east. However, a comet that obvious would have been seen by everyone, including King Herod's court. Yet in Matthew's account, Herod and his advisors are surprised by the news of the new star, so a comet seems unlikely.

Some scientists have suggested that the Magi were astrologers from Babylon, and they were tracking a rare conjunction of the planets that in astrological terms would have symbolized that a Messiah had been born in Judea. Such an esoteric sign would probably have gone unnoticed in Herod's court since Jews put little stock in astrology. But would the Magi, living in what is now Iraq, know anything about Jewish messianic prophecies? In fact, they might have. The Jews were exiled in Babylon for a few generations, and left a colony there when they returned to Jerusalem. So, it is possible court astrologers like the Magi could

have been familiar with Jewish prophecies of a Messiah who would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. If they saw Jupiter and two other planets rising in a constellation associated with Judea, they might have drawn their own astrological conclusions, based on a Jewish biblical prophecy. This explanation works much better than having Magi chasing a star or comet which only they have noticed.

The Magi may have been real, following a real light in the sky, but that actually makes their mention in the Gospel even more mysterious. Ancient Jews and early Christians were no fans of astrology, seeing it as a pagan form of magic. It seems unlikely that Matthew mentioned the Magi to celebrate the success of pagan astrology. Indeed, Matthew removes any kind of astrological terminology from the account, simply saying that they were following a new moving star. Yet in doing this, he paints himself into a corner – if the star was so obvious, why didn't anyone else notice it?

The illogic of the Gospel account suggests that Matthew was trying to make a point, and he was willing to twist the facts a bit to do it. That star is a form of code, one that is supposed to be understood not by astrologers, but by everyone. And the key to the code is that the star is new, and that it is moving.

For the people hearing this story two thousand years ago, a few things would have leapt to their attention right away. For the ancients, any star that moved was a contradiction in terms, a real problem to be concerned about. For

Romans and Jews alike, the stars didn't move around – they were like lights pasted to a black tent or globe. That's why the heavens were called the firmament – they were immovable. The only lights in the sky that could move were called planets – which meant 'wandering stars'.

Long before the Romans came along, observers of the sky had noticed that the planets didn't move in simple straight paths across the sky. If you make a drawing of Mars' path through the sky, for instance, taking note of its position night after night, you'll see a sort of curly cue pattern. It seems to go straight up for a while, then it makes a loop in the sky, going backwards for a while, and then returning to its original course. Astronomers call this strange dance in the sky retrograde motion. We know now that it is simply an illusion produced by Earth catching and passing Mars in orbit, so it seems to come near, and then goes in reverse. But thousands of years ago, it seemed like these lights in the sky had minds of their own. They wandered – on purpose.

For cultures across the globe, from China to the Mayans, to the Greeks and Romans, the implication was clear: those lights in the sky were gods. Among the Mayans, Venus was known as Quetzalcoatl; in Persia, Anahita; among the Romans, it was the goddess of love. The other planets also became gods, as did the Moon and the Sun. The importance of these seven divine beings was enshrined in the seven-day week. Each day was named after a god/planet. Some of these assignments survive in English : Monday is the Moon's day;

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Saturday is Saturn's day, Sunday belongs to the Sun. In French, more of the Roman names survive: Mardi is Mars' day; Mercredi is Mercury's day, Jeudi is Jupiter's day.

But not everything that moves in the sky is a planet, sun or moon. Comets and meteors also move, and they were a major source of anxiety to the ancients. Aristotle reasoned that since stars can't move, by definition, then things like comets must be atmospheric phenomena, part of the weather. So, a fiery rock in the sky becomes meteorological – a meteor. Comets were also tricky, and show up in records from around the world as portents of doom.

For the Romans, there was no doubt that the heavens were the residence of the gods, and so any sudden movement up there would have to have a divine explanation. Just 40 years before Christ was born, there was a clear example of how the Romans dealt with moving objects in the sky. Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.E., leaving a power vacuum in Rome. Caesar had angered the Senate by trying to become a dictator, and making pretensions towards being the son of a god.

Following his death, a power struggle ensued. One of the men to seize power was Octavian. Caesar had been his great uncle, and to bolster his popularity with the masses, Octavian hosted ten days of games at the Roman forum. During one of the games, a comet appeared in the sky during the day. Octavian declared that it was actually Caesar ascending to the heavens, proving his divine status. Octavian's ties to Caesar, and an astute

grasp of politics, led him to ultimately defeat Antony and Cleopatra, his last competitors for control of the empire.. He became the first Roman emperor, and renamed himself Caesar Augustus.

This same Caesar Augustus was still in power when Jesus was born. Indeed, he is credited with calling for the census which brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. In one his first official acts after taking control, Caesar Augustus declared that his great uncle Julius Caesar had become a god. That also meant that Caesar Augustus was officially a son of god. In the Gospel it seems like King Herod is the person to be wary of since he is officially the King of the Jews (thanks largely to help from Augustus). But anyone in the Roman Empire would have known that Jesus had even bigger competition, one who had already justified his claim to divinity on celestial events – a moving star, no less.

So, seen this way, it is not so surprising that the three Magi follow a moving star to find their god – it would be more surprising if they didn't. In Roman times, nothing divine happened without celestial help. As above, so below, was the saying of the time. If Jesus was really God on earth, or even just God's son, He would need to have some kind of heavenly announcement to qualify. A major god simply didn't matter unless he could take control of the sky. Indeed, this is one of the subtexts to Genesis, when God makes the stars, sun and all the lights in the sky. It is a declaration that our God made your gods, too, pagans. Whatever you are worshipping, our God made it.

Another clue to how the ancients saw the star comes from early Christians.

Around one hundred years after Jesus' birth, a bishop from Syria, Ignatius had this to say about the star above Bethlehem:

Up in the heavens a star gleamed out, more brilliant than all the rest; no words could describe its luster, and the strangeness of it left men bewildered. The other stars and the sun and moon gathered around it in chorus, but this star outshone them all.¹

The ancients weren't stupid – they knew the sun couldn't gather around a new star. Ignatius is speaking metaphorically. However, his point is that all the other lights in the sky that had been taken for gods were impelled to pay homage to this new god, who had His own light in the sky. They were being outshone, overshadowed, by the new star and the religion it heralded. Like Genesis it is a form of one up-manship.

That star in the sky was a kind of code for the end of the era of divine stars, and implicitly, an attack on astrology in general. At the time, many early Christians believed that when Christ arrived, pagan magic lost its power. It was believed that the Magi came not to congratulate the new king, but to formally capitulate – the astrology and

magic which they had practiced had finally been overthrown.

That star over Bethlehem was a sign that there was a new god in town, one who would overthrow all the others. The sky would never be the same, and neither would the earth. In the years to come, the Christians would do their best to denounce the divinity of the planets, and the astrology of the Magi would never be so strong again. A sign in the heavens meant a change in the heavens, a clearing away of gods from the skies. Ultimately, this cleansing would make possible the laws of physics that would discover that stars never wander because they want to, only because they must.

¹ Ignatius, "The Epistle to the Ephesians" quoted from *Early Christian Writings*, Maxwell Staniforth, trans. (London, 1968), p. 66.