

THE CHRISTMAS STAR

Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.

Excerpt from Apples of Gold

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Proverbs 25:11

Matthew records that the birth of Christ was accompanied by an extraordinary celestial event: a star that led the magi¹ (the “wise men”) to Jesus. This star “went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was” (Mat. 2:9). What was this star; and how did it lead the magi to the Lord? Over the years, many speculations have been offered.

The star in Matthew was not necessarily what we normally think of as a star: it was not necessarily an enormous mass of hydrogen and helium gas supposedly powered by nuclear fusion. The Greek word translated *star* is *aster* (αστηρ), from which we derive the word *astronomy*. In the Bible, a star is any shining point of light in the night sky. This would take in stars, but it would also include planets, supernovae, comets, or anything else that resembles a point of light. The question is: which of these would best describe the Christmas star?

A supernova (an exploding star) fits the popular conception of that star. When a star in our galaxy explodes, it shines very brightly for several months. Such events are very rare and are brighter than all other stars in our galaxy. However, a supernova does not fit the biblical account. The Christmas star went unnoticed by King Herod, the chief priests and scribes (Mat. 2:7). He had to ask the magi when the star had appeared, but everyone would have noticed a bright supernova.

Neither could the Christmas star have been a bright comet. Like a supernova, everyone would have noticed a comet. As comets were considered omens in the ancient world, had Herod not noticed it himself someone would surely have mentioned it to him. He would not have needed to ask the magi when a comet had appeared.

Moreover, neither a comet nor a supernova moves in such a way as to come and stand still over a specific location on the earth as did the Christmas star (Mat. 2:9). Apparently, the Star of Bethlehem was somehow a sign that would catch the attention of the magi but not be noticed by Herod and his counselors.

A Conjunction?

Another popular theory is that the Christmas star was a *conjunction* of planets. A conjunction is an event in which any two astronomical objects (especially planets) passes closely by a star or another planet. Such an event would have been very meaningful to the magi, who were knowledgeable of ancient astronomy, but may likely have gone unnoticed by others. Indeed, there was a rare type of conjunction involving Jupiter and Saturn beginning in the year 7 BC (Kepler’s). Also, there was a similar conjunction of Jupiter and the bright star Regulus beginning in the year 3 BC. Both of these events are close to the generally agreed upon year of Christ’s birth.

Advocates of such conjunction theories point out that the planets and stars involved had important religious significance in the ancient world. Jupiter was often considered the king of the gods, and Regulus was considered the “king star.” However, the Bible describes the Christmas star as *a single star* – not a conjunction of two or more stars. Furthermore, the objects involved in these conjunctions were not close enough to one other to appear as a single star!²

¹ It is normally assumed that three magi came to visit the newborn Jesus since they brought three gifts. However, the Bible does not actually tell us how many there were.

² Jason Lisle (Ph.D. Astrophysics, Uni. of Colorado), *The New Answers Book 2*, Master Books (2009), page 180. Although differing with him in several significant biblical matters, Dr. Lisle’s article was a major resource for this study. Having taken Astronomy during my university days and having continued my education in that field as well as in cosmology over many years in no way equals the expertise of Dr. Lisle in such matters.

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Now there was one (and *only* one) extraordinary conjunction around the time of Christ’s birth that could be called a “star.” In the year 2 BC, Jupiter and Venus moved so close to each other that they *briefly* appeared to merge into a single bright star. Such an event is extremely rare and could have been perceived as highly significant to the magi. Although this event would have been quite spectacular, it still does not fully match the description of the Christmas star. The biblical text indicates the magi saw the star on at least *three* occasions: (1) when they were home “in the east” (Mat. 2:2), (2) when they arrived at Jerusalem (Mat. 2:2), and (3) after meeting with Herod (Mat. 2:9).

But the merging of Jupiter & Venus happened *only once* – the evening of June 17, 2 BC.³ When passing each other, the full occultation of our two brightest planets only occurred in the far southern hemisphere. In the Middle East, the two were in contact at sunset (in the western sky) and appeared in conjunction *as one* for only a little more than one hour!⁴

Although each of the above events was truly spectacular, none of them fully satisfies the details of the straightforward reading of Matthew 2. Neither of the above speculations really explain how the star “went before” the wise men nor how it “stood over where the young child was” (Mat. 2:9). Indeed, no known natural phenomenon would be able to stand still over Bethlehem since all natural stars continually move relative to the earth.⁵ They appear to rise in the east and set in the west. However, the Bible does not say that this star was a *natural* phenomenon.

Natural Law

Now the laws of nature are really just descriptions of the way that God normally upholds the universe. But God is not bound by natural law; He is free to act in other ways to accomplish His purposes.

The Virgin Birth itself was a supernatural event; it cannot be explained within the context of known natural laws. Indeed, God had previously used supernatural signs in the heavens as a guide. In Exodus 13:21, God guided the Israelites by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Hence, it should not be surprising that a supernatural sign in the heavens would accompany the birth of the Creator come in the flesh. The star that led the magi was another one of those miraculous acts of God – specially designed and created for a unique purpose.⁶ Let us examine what this star did according to Matthew 2.

Who were the Wise Men? Purpose of the Star

The star of Bethlehem alerted the wise men “from the East,” to the birth of Christ, and prompt ing them to make the long trek to Jerusalem. They are generally thought to be from the area of Babylon but more likely from Persia, both of which are east of Jerusalem. If so, they may have had some knowledge of the Scriptures since the prophet Daniel had also lived in that region centuries earlier. Perhaps the magi were expecting a new star to announce the birth of Christ from reading Numbers 24: 17, which describes a star coming from Jacob and a King (“Scepter”) from Israel.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ Larry Bogan, past Professor of physics and astronomy at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, Canada.

⁵ Retrograde motion, the apparent motion of a planet in a direction opposite to that of other bodies within its system as observed from a particular vantage point, does not fully suffice as an explanation for the Christmas star’s hovering over the location of the Christ child. Such would hardly apply to the conjunctions under discussion where both objects would not only have to retrograde at precisely the same time, they would have to do so in such a way as to still appear as a single “star”.

⁶ Essentially all the other stars in our night sky obey the orderly laws of nature.

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The Wise Men (Jews whose ancestors had remained in Persia after the Babylonian exile and had not returned under Zerubbabel) were *not* astronomers or astrologers as is often surmised, but were Jewish rabbis or priests who were looking for the promised “Star out of Jacob” (Num. 24:17–19; Esther 1:13).

Moreover, the star was neither the result of a conjunction of the planets nor a comet. Viewed from earth, the sun, moon, stars and planets all move from east to west. Thus, it is scientifically *impossible* for any conjunction to move south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (Mat. 2:9)! This Scripture demands a miraculous occurrence. It moved, disappeared, reappeared and stood still over the place where Jesus lay. These are the scriptural facts concerning the Lord’s birth.

Strangely, the magi seem to have been the only ones who saw the star – or at least the only ones who understood its meaning. Herod had to ask the magi when the star had appeared (Mat. 2:7). Indeed, none of the chief priests or scribes that the king summoned mentioned anything about having seen an unusual object in the night sky. Now if only the magi saw the star, this would further support the view that the Christmas star was a supernatural manifestation from God and not an ordinary star, which would have been visible to all. The Word of God specially designates the Star of Bethlehem as “His” (Christ’s, Mat. 2:2), which further supports its unique nature.

Now the Bible does not actually say that the star *guided* the magi to Jerusalem (though it probably did); we only know for certain that it went before them on the journey from Jerusalem to the house where the Christ-child was. It is possible that the star initially acted only as a sign, rather than as a guide. The magi may have headed to Jerusalem only because, being the capital city, it would have seemed the logical place to find the King of the Jews.

Clearing Up Misconceptions

The magi did not arrive at the manger on the night of Christ’s birth, as did the shepherds (Luk. 2:15-16). They arrived the following day and found the baby Jesus and His mother living in a house (Mat. 2:11).

Matthew 2:9-10, indicates that the star was no longer visible when the magi reached Jerusalem but that it reappeared and led them some 6 miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This conclusion is supported in that the magi had to ask King Herod where the King of the Jews was born, indicating that the star was no longer guiding them (Mat. 2:2).

Now the star stopped and stood over the very house that Jesus was in – not just the city. It would have been impossible to determine which house was directly beneath a normal star. This suggests that the star over Christ must have traveled relatively near the surface of earth so that the magi could discern the precise location of the Child.

The fact that the star led the wise men to Christ is evidence that God uniquely designed the star for a very special purpose. It was a miraculous star and not a natural event. Is it not more than fitting that God would use a celestial object to announce the birth of Christ since “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psa. 19:1).

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