

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

by James D. Nickel

The appearance of magi in Matthew 2:1-12 is mixed with a heavenly wonder, His star, and the confrontation of two Kings, one currently on a throne and the other a child in Bethlehem. The magi are obviously possessors of profound wisdom in that they know that real kingship resides in that child, not the imposter Herod, who will soon set himself against the true King (cf. Psalm 2).

Who were the magi? Magi, plural of Magus and root of our word “magic,” were probably ancient court astronomers. They were not kings, but students of much wisdom and knowledge. They were ancient experts in the sciences, mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, medicinal herbs and cures, and establishment lore and superstition. They often traveled from court to court and made special trips to attend the birth or crowning of kings, paying their respects with gifts. We do not know their exact number in spite of the suggestion made by the Christmas hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” based probably on the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

They had a keen sense of timing which included knowledge of the coming Jewish Messiah. How did they arrive at this knowledge? How did they turn up in Judea to worship Jesus at the time they did? What did they really see in the sky? The answer to these questions requires a visit with two Old Testament books, Numbers and Daniel.

The magi came from the east (Matthew 2:1), literally from “the land of the sunrise.” Most scholars conclude that the land of their origin was the river Euphrates, either Babylon or Persia. It was because they resided in this locale that they were aware of the coming of a Messiah-King. Why?

There are two bodies of prophecy in Old Testament. First, there were prophets who spoke primarily to the Hebrew people, either the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern

The Wise Men and Jesus

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold magi from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the East, and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: But you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.” Then Herod, when he had secretly called the magi, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child; and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, til it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother; and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

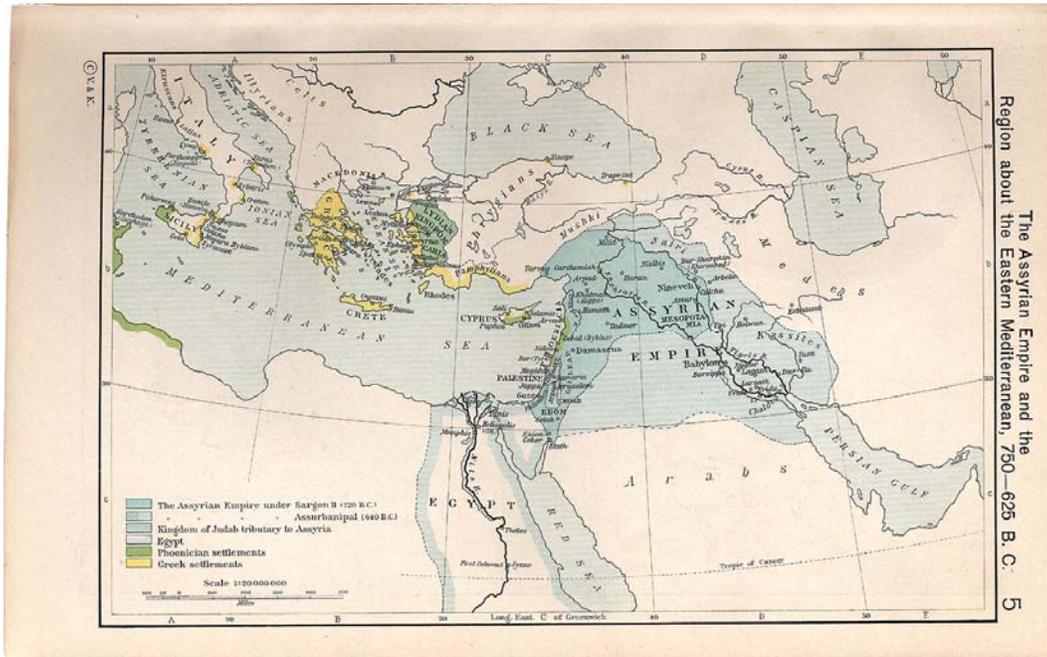
Matthew 2:1-12

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kingdom of Judah. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Micah are some examples. Second, there were prophetic words *not* spoken directly to Jews, but spoken in the midst of Gentile kings and peoples *and most of these words were given near the River Euphrates*.

The story of Balaam, found in Numbers 22-24, is the backdrop for understanding the magi's referent to "His star" (Matthew 2:2).



Balaam, a witch or a wizard and teacher of wizardry, lives at Pethor, near the River Euphrates, in the country of Abraham's origin. His main claim to fame is to "have the ear of every god in town." He also instinctively knows that the God of Israel was greater than all the gods from all the towns.

Balak, a Gentile King, fears the military might of Israel as they encamp in the plains of Moab in the land of Edom.¹ He knows that Balaam is the man who would give his armies the winning edge in battle so he calls for him to curse God's people.

But, God's word to Abraham and his seed thwarts this strategy, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Balak's desire backfires.

After a series of interchanges, including a talking donkey and an angel of the Lord appearing, Balaam finally arrives in Balak's backyard. From the high places of Baal, Balaam opens his mouth to curse but out comes a blessing instead (Numbers 24:1-9). No matter how much Balak wants a curse upon Israel, Balaam, even by his wizardry powers, cannot change the covenant purposes of God.

¹ This is one of the many encampments of the Israelites on their journey from the Red Sea deliverance to the land of promise.

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“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it” (Numbers 23:19-20).

In disgusting anger, Balak commands Balaam to flee back home. Before he leaves, Balaam pronounces an oracle about what Israel will do to Balak’s people in the days to come, a discourse about a star that would eventually find its way into the curriculum studies of the magi of Matthew.

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth ...” (Numbers 24:15-17).

Using the literary method of parallelism, a star shall come out of Jacob is equated with a scepter that shall rise out of Israel (cf. Genesis 49:10). This star, in Hebrew the word means “blazing, round, and shining,” is therefore connected to a great person of authority and kingship. This star is not a celestial body, but an image, a symbol, of a coming king who will, by shining His light upon the world, determine its destiny.²

The connection of blazing light to rulership was not foreign to the Israelite mind. There was only one piece of furniture in the inner sanctuary, or holy of holies,³ in the tabernacle.⁴ It was a rectangular box called the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat was its lid. Positioned on the two shorter sides of the mercy seat were two cherubim hammered of gold, wings touching. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, the high priest would enter this inner sanctum and sprinkle the blood of sacrifice on the mercy seat showing that the sins of the people were covered. God’s manifest presence revealed itself as radiant light shining above the wings of the cherubim. This uncreated light, the Shekinah glory (Hebrews 9:5), was the “pillar of fire” that *guided* the Israelites by night in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22; Numbers 14:14; Nehemiah 9:12). It was the glory of God’s presence manifested by this outshining radiance that revealed to the people the throne, the rulership, of the Lord of hosts (I Samuel 4:4; II Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:6).

Moses, the coordinator of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, added this prophecy to Scripture. It also had to be recorded and stored by Balaam, somewhere in the vicinity of the River Euphrates.

Wise men are mentioned in the book of Daniel and it is to this book that we now turn.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieges Jerusalem ca. 600 BC and a young boy by the name of Daniel is among the prisoners taken to Babylon in the region of the River Euphrates (Daniel 1:1-2). Thus the 70-year captivity of Judah begins (Jeremiah 25:11-12; Daniel 9:2).

In Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar orders his officials to train Daniel, along with three of his friends,⁵ in the ways of the Chaldeans for service in his court (Daniel 1:3; 2:20-22). Upon graduation, these Jewish captives join the ranks of the “wise men” of Babylon. It is critical to

² From ancient times, stars have always been associated with kings and their kingdoms. Even today, on most national flags, you will see a star or a configuration of stars.

³ *naos* in the Greek.

⁴ Also called “the tent of meeting.”

⁵ Hananiah (renamed Shadrach), Mishael (renamed Meshach), and Azariah (renamed Abednego).

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note that, while under this training, the God of Israel gives these four youths knowledge in every branch of literature and wisdom. Daniel even knows how to interpret dreams and visions (Daniel 1:17).

As the book of Daniel unfolds, we see how God uses these men in uncertain and troubling times to powerfully impact a pagan culture. Even in the worst of times, God's faithfulness reigns supreme and seeks to bless men who trust Him wholly and are thereby willing to be trained and used of Him.

In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, one of his dreams troubles him so much that he could not sleep. None of the wise men could interpret except Daniel (Daniel 2:23). In the dream, Nebuchadnezzar beheld a single great statue, each section, from head to foot, made of different types of metal: gold, silver, bronze, iron, and a mixture of iron and clay. Then, a stone made without hands struck the statue at its feet of iron and clay crushing the whole thing so thoroughly that chaff carried it away with the wind, without a trace. All that was left was this strange stone, made even stranger by the fact that it grew into a great mountain the filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:32-35).

Daniel interprets the dream revealing that the parts of the statue, from head to foot, were successive kingdoms while the stone destroying the statue at its base represents a kingdom made without hands, eternal and enduring (Daniel 2:37-45).

The statue's head of gold is Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. After Babylon, in succession, the statue reveals the silver breast and arms of the Medes and Persians, the bronze belly and thigh of the Greeks, and finally the iron legs and iron and clay feet of the Roman Empire. In the days of the Roman kings, God sets up His indestructible kingdom and crushes all the others (cf. Psalm 2).

Daniel's interpretation was not given to His people. It was spoken directly to the world's greatest dictator of the time and originally written in the language of the Chaldeans.⁶ Stored in the archives of Babylon, on the river Euphrates, copies were given to the Hebrew people and it became a part of their Scriptures.

The rest of the book of Daniel builds upon the theme revealed by this one vision. In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel writes and summaries the meaning of his own dream. Instead of a statue of four parts, Daniel sees four great beasts coming up from the sea. The first is a lion having the wings of an eagle, the second, a bear, the third a leopard, and the four a most dreadful, terrifying, and strong beast (Daniel 7:1-7). These four animals correspond with the individual sections of Nebuchadnezzar's gold to iron and clay statue.

In the days of the cruelty of Rome, the fourth beast, thrones are instituted. Then, the Ancient of Days takes his seat and judges the beast. After that, Daniel, in the night visions,

The Wise Men and Daniel

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever ...

Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

Daniel 2:44, 48

⁶ This language, Aramaic, is found from Daniel 2:4 to 7:28.

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sees one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven receiving dominion and glory and an indestructible and eternal kingdom from the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9-28). This kingdom, given to the Son of Man, is equivalent to the kingdom and stone image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

Daniel sees and records other visions of future events related to history, his people, and a coming Messiah-Prince including the great distress, the sufferings and death, that this King experiences (Daniel 8-9, 11-12). Note especially Daniel 9:24-27, a message containing a cryptic outline from the angel Gabriel delineating "seventy weeks"⁷ of history starting from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the coming of the Messiah-King to cut a covenant and be cut off, or put to death. The Messiah-King corresponds to the Son of Man revealed in Daniel 7:13-14.

The decree that starts the seventy weeks ticking refers to a prophecy in Isaiah directed to the Persian king Cyrus. Cyrus is next great monarch on the scene after he conquers Babylon (Daniel 1:1; cf. Daniel 1:21). Daniel knows about the prophecies of Isaiah that address Cyrus *by name* (Isaiah 44:28-45:13), about 150 years before the monarch's birth. It would be a reliable conjecture that Daniel probably informs Cyrus of these words.

Scripture registers the fulfillment of this word to Cyrus (II Chronicles 36:22-23; cf. Jeremiah 29:10; Ezra 1:1-3) and a record of this event would have been certainly placed in the archives of Persia.

Many other events and proclamations recorded in Daniel would have been archived in like manner. This would include the proclamation decree by Nebuchadnezzar after the amazing events surrounding the fiery furnace and the mysterious "fourth man" in the fire.

"... Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way" (Daniel 3:28-29).

Next, Nebuchadnezzar declared the signs and wonders of the Most High God to all the peoples in his realm:

"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation ... At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according

⁷ Weeks is the Hebrew *shabuin* meaning "sevens." Hence, seventy weeks means 70 units of 7 or $70 \times 7 = 490$. Seven is the number of covenant people. The Sabbath, the mark of covenant, is the 7th day (Exodus 31:13). The Sabbatical year is every 7th year, a "vacation" on God because He would grant a double crop the year before (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-11; 31:10-13). The Year of Jubilee is every seven times seven or forty-nine years. This is a year of release and freedom when all debts resolved (Leviticus 25:8-55). Therefore, ten Jubilees = 490 years. God is saying to Daniel that in ten Jubilee's all that He had promised would come to completion. The ultimate Jubilee of release and freedom would be set in motion with the appearance of the Messiah-King (Isaiah 61; Luke 4:18).

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to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’ At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Daniel 4:1-3, 34-37).

Belshazzar was a ruler after Nebuchadnezzar and, before his death, issued a proclamation that Daniel had authority as a third ruler in his kingdom:

“Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom” (Daniel 5:29).

Darius, the king after Belshazzar, issued a decree after Daniel’s deliverance from the lion’s den, writing it to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth:

“Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions” (Daniel 6:25-27).

The magi were heirs to this information since they had access to the archives. This knowledge was not just in these records for the prophets were read daily in Jewish synagogues that were sprinkled all over the map of the Middle East. Any Gentile could access these places of worship and could learn that the Star-Scepter would arise from God’s people, the Messiah was coming, and determine that the time of fulfillment was near! Throughout the whole of the Roman Empire, anyone paying attention was waiting for a Deliverer King who would be born in Judea and rule the world.

Put yourself in the head of the magi. They knew that they were living in the last days of Daniel, the days of the beast of the Roman Empire, and, by calculations based upon the ninth chapter of Daniel, they knew that the time of indestructible kingdom, the stone built without hands, was about ready to strike; i.e., to humble the Roman Empire by putting it into its proper place.⁸

They waited and watched ...

and then something incredible happened.

In the land of the east, they saw something in the night sky.

The direction east appears in the Matthew narrative three times (Matthew 2:1, 2, 9) and it cannot be dismissed as insignificant. In Scripture, east is an image that conveys a message.

God plants the Garden of Eden toward the *east* (Genesis 2:8). Although the pre-Flood geographic positioning of the Garden is not certain, there are enough hints to allow for an educated guess. The Garden was probably near the River Euphrates.

⁸ This “putting into proper place” is the basis of the Apostle Paul’s analysis of the function of civil government in Romans 13. And, when Paul exhorted believers to pray *for* Caesar, he put Caesar in his place as a servant, *not* God, since Caesar demanded that prayers be made *to* him (I Timothy 2).

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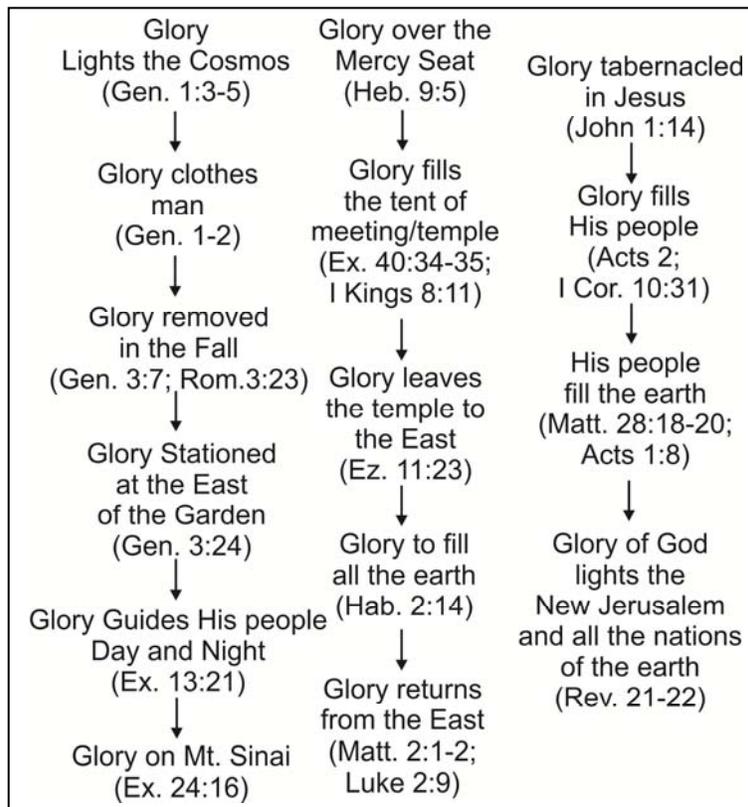
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After the fall of man and his expulsion from paradise, at the *east* of the Garden God stations cherubim and the blazing light of a flaming sword to guard, or be a hedge about, the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).

After Cain killed Abel, he settles in the land of Nod, *east* of Eden (Genesis 4:16).

The first Genesis reference connects east to Paradise and the last two connect the east with judgment, i.e., banishment from God's presence of blessing.

An *east* wind brings both the judgment of the plague of locusts upon the Egyptians and divides the waters of the Red Sea on the great day of Israel's deliverance from bondage (Exodus 10:13; 14:21). Here east is connected to judgment and redemption.



On the *east* side, toward the sunrise, in the encampment of the tribes of Israel resides the camp of Judah (Numbers 2:3). When summoning the congregation of Israel for worship or marching via the sound of trumpets, the camps on the *east* would go first (Numbers 10:5). Here east is connected to worship, marching, and Judah, the tribe of Kings.

The prophet Isaiah, using apocalyptic images of judgment and salvation, speaks of the glorification of the Lord in the *east*, in the direction of the sunrise (Isaiah 24:15).

As a result of the idolatry of God's people, God shows the prophet Ezekiel that His glory is departing. First, He brings the prophet into the sanctuary of the Lord to view twenty-five men with their backs to the temple, facing *the east*, and prostrating themselves toward the sun (Ezekiel 8:16). Next, God reveals the departure of the glory of the Lord, hovering over the cherubim, from the threshold of the temple moving to the entrance of the *east gate* of the sanctuary (Ezekiel 10:19). Finally, the glory departs from the city standing over the mountain *east of the city*, possibly the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23).

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In one of the most dramatic moments of Ezekiel's prophecy, He describes the return of the glory of God to the temple *from the east* (Ezekiel 43:1-5). Later, this glory, as a living river, spreads from the threshold of the temple toward the east and eventually to the ends of the earth bringing healing to everything within its reach (Ezekiel 47).

The magi, residing near the River Euphrates, were not only mindful of the words of Balak and Daniel, but, as astronomers, they were mindful of the sky. One night, they saw something. What was it?

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they reported to Herod that they saw "His star" in the east or toward the sunrise (Matthew 2:2). The Greek phrase used in the text, *astera en te anatole*, means "star in the east" or "star in the sunrise." *Anatole* was an ancient astronomical term used to describe the rising of a celestial object in the east, the location of the rising of the sun. This is called an acronical rising. In ancient astronomy, when a celestial object rises as the sun sets or rises in the direction of the setting sun, it is an acronical rising.

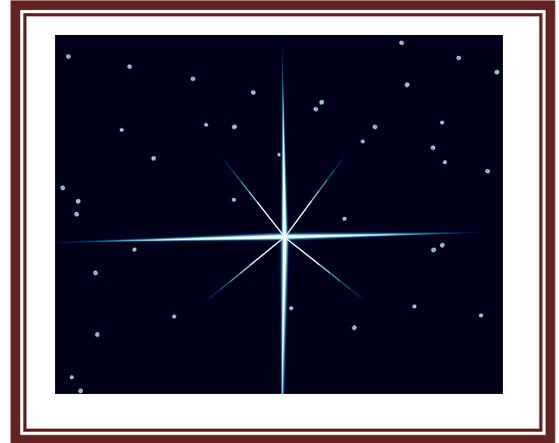
One night, after the setting of the sun, the magi saw what they called *His star*, i.e., the Star of Jacob. What did they see?

In the past two thousand years, a plethora of explanations have arisen that try to explain what the magi saw. To some, they saw a blazing comet. To others, they saw a nova or supernova. For many, what appeared in the sky was a conjunction⁹ of celestial objects, i.e., stars with planets. Based upon approximate dating; i.e., using estimated dates for the death of Herod, and with computer software, one can ascertain many types of interesting conjunctions.¹⁰ Some of these include the conjunction of Regulus, a star in the constellation Leo, with Jupiter or a conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars.¹¹ These would be spectacular sights carrying relevant significance according to ancient astronomical lore, but as natural occurrences they would have been easily forecast by these court astronomers.

One of these conjunctions may have been relevant to the magi at the time, but what made them pack their bags, prepare their caravan, gather their treasures, and head west for the land of Israel? The answer to this question lies in their testimony as given by Matthew.

"After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:9-11).

The second time the magi saw the same star was nearby Jerusalem. Whatever it was, it *guided* them; i.e., went before them and stopped moving at a specific location in Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusa-



⁹ In astronomy, a conjunction is an apparent close approach between celestial objects as seen in the sky.

¹⁰ With software such as *Starry Night Pro* (<http://www.simulationcurriculum.com/>) you can "go back in time and place" to see what was going on in the heavens. We can calculate the occurrence of conjunctions by using the mathematical equations governing the motion of the planets formulated by Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). At the time of Christ, court astronomers could accurately predict these conjunctions in advance of their occurrence.

¹¹ See Ernest L. Martin and David Sielaff, ed., *The Star of Bethlehem: The Star that Astonished the World* (Portland: The Associates of Scripture Knowledge, [1996] 2003). For a visual rendition of Martin's research, see Rick Larson, *The Star of Bethlehem* (MP Power Pictures, 2009).

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lem. The location over which “His star” stood was a house (*oikian* in Greek), not a manger, of the child, *paidion* in Greek meaning “a toddler.”¹² No celestial object, whether a comet, nova, star, or conjunction of celestial objects, can stand directly over a house. Even a planet going through retrograde motion could not target a specific house.¹³ This means that this object, visibly real, was something else.

The magi originated from the homeland of Abraham and we recall that the God of glory, the God of outshining radiance, the radiant light residing above the cherubim, *appeared* to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2). After traveling from Ur to Palestine, God promised Abraham that through his seed, the one, many shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:16).

Could it be in God’s purposes to call the magi by the same glory? Could it be that this same light of glory appeared to the magi to confirm that the time had come for Abraham’s seed, Jesus Christ, to appear? That the glory of the Lord was returning to Jerusalem, from the east, to bless the world (Acts 1:8; 3:25)?

What the magi saw in the sky was His star was the *glory of God*. What they saw was the supernatural radiance of blazing light that guided Israel of old and now directed the magi to follow that light as it returned to Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 43:1-5).

In the dark night of the ancient world, the sun of righteousness was rising (Malachi 4:2) and the Messianic light was calling for all to rise with Him. The magi arose to the brightness of the rising of the glory of the Lord, bearing gifts of worship.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD” (Isaiah 60:1-6).

After seeing His star, it takes at least four months, maybe one year, for the magi’s caravan to arrive in Jerusalem. With a regal authority, they meet Herod the Great (ca. 73-4 BC) at his palace. Herod, the Edomite King of the Jews, is a Roman puppet king with a sharp eye for political maneuvering and colossal building projects. He is murderously insane. Caesar Augustus accentuates his filicidal history and ridicules his kosher heritage with this quip, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than one of his sons.”¹⁴

Hearing this news from the east (Daniel 11:44; Matthew 2:3), Herod’s fear of a rival king triggers a troubled paranoia. All Jerusalem is also distraught because *they know Herod*.

Hiding the murder and madness of his heart, he gathers Scripture experts together to determine the whereabouts of the birthplace of this alleged “King of the Jews.” They respond,

¹² This means that they visited Jesus some months after His birth in the manger. According to Matthew 2:16, Herod ordered the slaughter of male children two years and under as he calculated from the Magi. This indicates that Christ was no longer a newborn when the Magi visited Him.

¹³ A planet normally moves eastward through the stars from night to night and month to month, but regularly exhibits what is called “retrograde motion.” Retrograde motion is when a planet, after it passes the opposite point in the sky from the Sun, appears to cease its usual slow eastward movement against the background of the stars; it reaches a stationary point, or it stops, and then appears to start moving backwards or westward, retrograding, against the background of the stars for several weeks. Again, it slows, stops, and resumes its eastward course.

¹⁴ Herod not only murdered his sons, but also one of his wives, Mariamne.

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“Bethlehem of Judah,” confirming the fact that the Star of Jacob/Scepter from Israel would be the heritage of the tribe of Judah and the shepherd-ruler David.

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6; cf. Micah 5:1-5; II Samuel 5:2).

Next, with hideous plans already forming in his mind, Herod asks the magi for details about the time the star appeared to them. Then, he sends them to Bethlehem to search and find the child and then report back saying, with feigned sincerity, “I want to worship Him, too.” It would be reasonable to conjecture that Herod employs spies to follow the magi.

Upon seeing the star the second time, the magi rejoice with exceeding and great joy. Guided by the light, they come to the house, see the child with His mother Mary, and worship Him as one would adore a great monarch.

These men were the first Gentiles pay homage to the Messiah in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 41:2; 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; Acts 13:47; 26:23) and as a harbinger of God’s salvation purposed to encompass the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:6; Acts 1:8; I John 2:1-2).

As is their custom, they bestow their respects with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (cf. Isaiah 60:6).

Gold, a kingly gift, was a sign declaring to all that the world now had its true King, King of kings, Lord of lords (I Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16), a king who would rule the world with the scepter of His word, the incredibly good news called the gospel. This gift was most likely used by Joseph and Mary for traveling and accommodation expenses incurred during their future stay in Egypt.

Frankincense was an ingredient used in the making of incense that was burned on the altar of incense (Exodus 30:34). Hence, this gift spoke of the reality of worship and that, in fulfillment of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, this Child was designated as the true high priest, the One who presents the acceptable sacrifice for the sin of the world, *Himself* (John 1:29; John 3:16).

That Christ, the anointed One, was born to die for the sins of the world is indicated by the last gift, myrrh, a gum resin used as a perfume for embalming (cf. John 19:39) and as an ingredient of the holy anointing oil.

When my family lived in Australia in the 1980s, we lived in the countryside (near its many farmlands). Hence, we were able to see the night sky with clarity.

When my daughter was about two years old, I took her outside one night. First, I took the time to arrange the sleeping bag for comfort. Then, I laid down and put her on my chest. I told her, “Look up.” Her response ... a gasp of awe. The sight of the starry night literally took her breathe away.

God does not let these men return to Herod so He warns them in a dream, a dream that their collective wisdom receives and heeds. They came one way in their journey to pay homage to the King, and after their service of worship, they went home by another way.

God, through an angel, also appears to Joseph in a dream commanding him to flee to Egypt because Herod is on a “seek and destroy” mission, inspired, according to Scripture, by the dragon, the devil (cf. Revelation 12:1-6). In the stealth of night, out of sight of any possible agents of Herod, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus depart for Egypt.¹⁵

¹⁵ Matthew notes a fulfillment of a prophecy of Hosea in this relocation, “Out of Egypt did I call My Son” (Hosea 11:1). Israel

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Based upon information he had extracted from the magi, Herod ascertains the approximate age of the child Jesus and is ready to implement his cut-throat plans. When the magi do not return, he senses that he had been tricked, and with an intensified rage, he murders all male children in Bethlehem under two years of age.

This genocide is now known as “The massacre of the innocents.” This incident is not confirmed by secular history because the number of deaths would not have been large enough for historical note. But, to Matthew, this slaughter was noteworthy,

“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18; cf. Jeremiah 31:15).

Jeremiah situated these words in the midst of a prophecy filled not only with sadness, due to the exigencies of the Babylonian captivity, but with the hope and joy of redemption in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:10-37). Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is mentioned. Next, Jeremiah comforts the mother of these tribes in her duress at the loss of her children to the captivity of foreigners,

“Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country” (Jeremiah 31:16-17).

In Jeremiah’s day, the tomb of Rachel was located on the border of the geographic territory given to Benjamin and Ephraim, on the way to Ephrath or Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). Ramah, meaning height, was a city on a hill in Benjamin, a few miles north of Jerusalem. Later, her tomb was moved south, to the Bethlehem area. Matthew omits the consolation; he only includes the lament. This lament is a plea for consolation, a consolation that only can be met by the redemptive response of God. King Messiah had come, but there was immediate weeping due to the murderous hand of Herod. Yes, Messiah’s kingdom had come but not without opposition. In the resistance of darkness to light there will be times of weeping, but there is a greater reality, a greater consolation to come.

Herod died shortly after this, a death unspeakable in its horror. According to the Roman historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 17.6.5), a loathsome disease descended upon the ruler causing a burning fever, ulcerated entrails, foul discharges, convulsions, and stench. When Herod realized that death was knocking at his door, he ordered one-thousand people to be killed on his death so that someone would be crying. What a miserable commentary on the end of a life dedicated to darkness. Fortunately, no one followed his orders. Herod Archelaus (23 BC-18 AD), the worst son of Herod, succeeded his father on the throne, ruling from 4 BC to 6 AD.

In Egypt, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph telling him to return to Israel. Upon arrival, Joseph is afraid of returning to Bethlehem because of Archelaus. Receiving a warning from God in a dream that confirms his fear, he re-settles his family in Nazareth of Galilee, thus fulfilling the prophetic word that Christ would be called a Nazarene. How?

Nezer, in Hebrew, means “root.” Isaiah spoke of Galilee of the Gentiles (Isaiah 9:1-2) seeing a great light, and upon those sitting in a dark land the *dawning of light*, the *sunrise*, shall come, a passage quoted by Matthew (Matthew 4:15-16). Next, Isaiah describes the Spirit-anointed One, the Messiah, as a shoot springing from the stem of Jesse, the father of David,

was called God’s Son in the Old Testament, but here Matthew equates God’s Son with Jesus. Hence, Jesus is the embodiment of everything Israel experienced and hoped for. He is the true Israel (cf. John 15:1; cf. Isaiah 5:1-7).

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and that a branch (*nezzer*) from his roots will bear fruit, so much so that “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:1-10).

We see a multiplicity of magnificent images coalescing in the chronicles of the magi. First, we acknowledge that the magi represent the best of the scientific wisdom of ancient times. What, then, is the significance of the representatives of ancient science bringing gifts to the Christ Child? Since, according to John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:15-17, this child is also the Creator and Sustainer of all things and since science is the study of things created, then, in the gifts of the magi, we see the students of creation offering the very best they have to the Author of creation. The application is that the treasures of science should be laid at the feet of the Creator. Christ, if lifted up in His glory, will draw all men, including men of science, to Himself (John 12:32). In history, many key men of science have been drawn to Christ. We only need to mention men like Pascal, Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo, Kepler, and Maxwell, men with deep Christian convictions, to name a few.¹⁶

But, something deeper is embedded in the connection between science and the Christian faith. The Biblical doctrine of Creation establishes two premises that buttress the very doing of science. First, the physical world of matter and energy, being created, is separate from its Creator; i.e., it is *not* the Creator ... it is *not* divine. Second, the physical world of matter and energy is intelligible; i.e., it is marked with a rational and contingent order in its fundamental structures.¹⁷

The idea of the divinity of the matter and energy invokes many “isms”; e.g., animism, pantheism. If nature is divine, then nature can be nothing but the object of worship; it would be sacra religious to subject it to experimentation. If nature is *not* divine, it is then open to an ongoing interplay of critical and experimental analysis.

Since an all-wise, intelligent God brought the physical world of matter and energy into existence, then the world of matter and energy must be marked by an intelligible order; i.e., it must be intelligible and knowable. The ground of operational science is the Word made flesh as revealed in John 1:1-14, i.e., the doctrine of Creation. Christ is *not* hostile to science; He is the condition, the ground, for its feasibility. By their gifts to the Christ child, the magi established the fundamental

It should never cease to amaze us that the Babe born in Bethlehem created the vast outreaches of space, including the starry host that no man can number (Genesis 1:14-19; Psalm 147:4-5; Isaiah 40:26; John 1:1-14; Colossians 1:15-17). It should never cease to stun us that, as a youngster, when Jesus beheld the stars in the night sky, He looked through created eyes at what He created.

¹⁶ For a study, by a Jesuit priest, of Christians involved in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geography, mineralogy, geology, physiology, zoology, and botany, see Karl A. Kneller, *Christianity and the Leaders of Modern Science: A Contribution to the History of Culture during the Nineteenth Century* (Pinckney: Real-View-Books, [1911] 1995).

¹⁷ Contingency, to the ancient Greeks, meant an “accident of chance” and therefore placed in one-to-one correspondence with irrationality. In the dualistic thinking of the Greeks, matter that is the makeup of nature is a *necessary* entity; i.e., it is the way it is and could not be any other way. Therefore, its forms could only be studied by *a priori* thinking; i.e., using logical-deductive methods established in the abstract study of forms. The Biblical doctrine of a contingent creation means that God could have made things differently. Out of all possibilities known to Himself, He made the world as it now is and invites man to study it to find out the inner nature of its rational order (Proverbs 25:2). Hence, the contingent creation, a creation dependent upon the All-Wise God as its source and sustainer, invites man engage in *a posteriori* thinking; i.e., empiricism founded in non-dualistic realism, which is now recognized as the heartbeat of operational science. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998).

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presupposition of all knowledge, not just science: Christ, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is the proper source and goal of all knowledge (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Romans 11:33-36).

In the chronicles of the magi, we also see the image of a star signifying both rulership and guidance in the midst of opposition. We see the east signifying both judgment and the return of glory. We encounter great wisdom and profound foolishness. We behold avarice and anger leading to deep sorrow, but overridden by providential protection and certain hope. Darkness will turn to light, sorrow will be engulfed by consolation, and death will be swallowed up by life.

Christ the King was born to die. The mystery of His passion is anticipated by the antipathy of Herod and through the myrrh given by magi. *But there is more.* Myrrh is an anointing for a dead body, given to resist, for a time, the putrid smell of decomposition. On that Easter morning long ago, by the time the women came to the burial tomb of Jesus to anoint His body with spices containing myrrh, He was gone ... He had already risen. Myrrh was no longer needed because He had conquered death.

In His incarnation, He took the flesh of fallen humanity, the old man (John 1:14; Romans 8:3; Romans 6). In His death, death died and all fallen humanity died with him. In His resurrection, He raises fallen humanity to a new life as a new man. In His Ascension, Christ takes the new man to the throne of His father where He receives authority, power, and a kingdom (Matthew 28:18-20).

This Kingdom negates the power of every other kingdom and grows to fill the whole earth and save the world. The magi are the first of the Gentiles to worship the King and they are heralds of more to come, every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Acts 1:8; Revelation 5:9-14; Genesis 12:1-3; Acts 3:25-26).

The King who received gifts at His birth, gives gifts in His ascension (Ephesians 2, 4). He grants the healing graces of salvation in the Holy Spirit (John 14-16), given to let believers know that Christ has been crowned Lord of all (Acts 2:33-36) and to energize believers to reign in life (Romans 5:21) since Christ, as the Prince of Life, conquered the sorrows of death (Acts 3:15; Isaiah 35:10; 51:11; Revelation 21:4). Rachel's weeping, along with ours, is consoled in the fullness of Christ by the *embrace* of the love of God the Father in the Holy Spirit (Luke 15:20; Acts 10:44; 11:15; Romans 5:1-4).

... and Christ the King shall reign forever and ever.