

## **The Star of Bethlehem – “What must have been” \*\***

Christmases come and Christmases go and without fail they are heralded by new theories about what the Star of Bethlehem might have been. Sadly, most theories are not based on scientific principles.

The only primary source of information concerning the so-called Star of Bethlehem can be found in The Gospel according to St Matthew. The information is sparse and is often misquoted. For example:

- It is not stated that the wise men followed the star to Jerusalem. If they had and they came from the east then the star would have been in the West. Wise men would also probably travel in the day and the road to such an important place as Jerusalem would have been clear.
- The number of wise men is not specified. There is no reference to them being Kings and they are not named.
- It does not state that Herod had not seen the star. It merely states that he enquired at what time it appeared.
- The star is not qualified in anyway. In particular there is nothing to say how bright the star was. However, by implication it had to be a naked eye object.

In addition, it is said, though not by Matthew, that Persian Magi followers of the Zoroastrian religion were at the time waiting for a Messiah that would be born of a virgin and who would bring about a new world order.

The traditional picture of Magi crossing the desert following a star makes a nice story but has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Considering the actual words used in the original Greek “Star in the East” is now considered to be “Star at its rising”. This is interpreted as the star's heliacal rising.

Matthew’s gospel was probably written around 90 years after the nativity. It is therefore highly unlikely that the author had first hand knowledge. In addition, it is very unlikely that the author was the apostle Matthew.

It is now over 1900 years since the gospel was written and the speculations of what the star could have been have gone on for almost as long. The usual approach is to first determine the most appropriate date for the nativity and then try and determine what astronomical events there were around at that time.

This approach in itself is unscientific as it is based on the preconceived idea that an important person’s birth is heralded by some sign in the sky. This sign according to various beliefs can be a simple astronomical event (e.g. a nova) or an event with astrological significance (e.g. a conjunction).

The problem is that all such solutions fail as heavenly signs just do not foretell events back on earth. The solutions are often defended on the basis of what was believed at the time. This is no defence as however hard you believe in something it won’t come true if it isn’t true. Consequently, if an astrologer interprets something in the sky as a sign that a King is born it is highly unlikely to be

correct. Unless there is a causal relationship between a heavenly event and a happening on earth then the only chance of it being right is by coincidence or if the prophecy becomes self prophesying.

Once one accepts this line of argumentation it immediately eliminates most of the solutions that have been peddled over the centuries. It does however raise the interesting question of why astronomers and other scientific scholars still continue to search for such signs?

Could it have been a miracle or some other sign sent by God? It is beyond the scope of this short note to speculate. However, it is unscientific to completely eliminate the possibility as “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.

Some people have even suggested that it could have been a UFO. As one book, on the subject, claims; a UFO appears to the Magi, convinces them by telepathy to go to Jerusalem, then reappears when they set out for Bethlehem, and points out the house with a bright beam. As an aside it is interesting to note that there is much more so-called evidence for UFOs than there has ever been for the Star of Bethlehem.

Though these two latter suggestions cannot be eliminated completely it is safe to say that the probability of either one being involved in the Star of Bethlehem is vanishingly small and can therefore be safely ignored.

This leaves just the option that the story was made up. This however does not mean necessarily that the author was acting out of bad faith. Presumably the author was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. Presumably he believed that heavenly signs proclaimed the birth of important people. So, his story reflected what to his mind “must have been”. An example of Jewish Midrash where missing information is interpolated from known facts.

This conclusion excludes the reality of the Magi following a star. So, it is no longer necessary to speculate who they were and where they came from. It also explains why it is that astronomers have been unable to come up with a solution that is generally accepted whereas in the story the Magi found the evidence compelling. One no longer has to explain why the appearance of this particular star was so unique and compelling to the Magi. If not, how did they avoid, over the centuries, being triggered falsely by other stars that would have led to many wasted journeys? It also explains why the Magi were never heard from again.

This solution answers other questions and more importantly leaves no uncomfortable loose ends. For example:

\* It explains why Josephus makes no reference to the slaughter of the innocents even though he does mention many of Herod's other atrocities. This part of the story may have been inspired by the 'slaughter of the innocents' referred to in the book of Exodus. Included perhaps to add additional symbolism into the story by comparing Christ with Moses.

It avoids having to accept the harshness of a god who would allow such a massacre to take place. This may have resonated with Jewish readers of the time who were brought up in the traditions of god as outlined in the Old Testament but not to Christians today who have a cultural background based on the traditions of a loving god as outlined in the New Testament.

\* It avoids having to explain why Matthew made the rather strange choice of non-Jewish Astrologers to be the first to pay homage to the baby Jesus.

\* It explains why after all that supposed effort the Magi never offered any support, proclaimed the birth or took any further action whatsoever. "Is that the actions of wise men?" one may ask.

\* It gets over any philosophical problems raised by a real event due to the finite velocity of light. For example, what is the significance of light from the star today only just reaching other planets about another 2000 light years further away?

\* It explains why the story is different in Luke and doesn't appear elsewhere.

\* The solution is independent of whether Jesus was the Messiah or not. Independent on whether there is a god or not. A solution that should be equally acceptable to believers and unbelievers. It is not a fundamental belief of the Christian religion that the star be real.

The conclusion that the story was 'made up' rules out the actual historicity of the Magi and the Star but it does not rule out Magi and a star inspiring the story.

It is believed that the gospel was probably written between AD 80 and 100 and possibly within the more restricted timescale of AD 85-90. The date was certainly after the Jewish uprising of AD 66 and the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in AD 70.

One can assume that the author would not have included the story if it didn't serve his purpose well with the intended audience. The gospel was aimed at a Jewish audience and its purpose was to convince them that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Two other significant events took place in AD66 and were recorded by several contemporaneous historians. One was the appearance of Halley's Comet and the second was a deputation of Magi that came from the east to bring gifts and to pay homage to the Roman Emperor Nero. Is it possible that the author of Matthew's gospel used these recent and well-known events to embellish his story and help it resonate with the people of his time?

The apparition of Comet Halley in AD66 fits with the biblical description though this is not of fundamental importance:

When it first appeared, it rose in the eastern sky just before dawn.

When it was at its brightest, it was visible throughout most of the hours of darkness.

It moved in a westerly direction – each night it was further west with respect to the background stars.

Towards the end of its visibility period, it was nearly stationary in right ascension and could be seen in the southern sky.

The Magi's audience with Nero also has uncanny similarities: They bowed down. They offered gifts. They recognised him as a god. Finally, on leaving they returned home by a different route. So, a

similar Magi visit to Jesus implied that he was at least as important as Nero that had already been recognised as a god.

In conclusion the incorporation in the gospel of the Magi's endorsement of Jesus and a Star heralding his birth was probably a brilliant piece of spin. Its aim being to convince people without doubt that Jesus was the expected Messiah. A story that could be expected to resonate with Matthew's intended audiences.

However, from the author of the gospel's point of view he was not making up the Star of Bethlehem story he was merely writing down "What must have been".

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\*\* see also: Jenkins, R.M. (June 2004) "The Star of Bethlehem and the Comet of AD 66" Journal of the British Astronomy Association (114). pp. 336–43. Download at: [http://www.bristolastro.org.uk/www/media/Publications\\_BAS\\_Documents/the\\_star\\_of\\_bethlehem.pdf](http://www.bristolastro.org.uk/www/media/Publications_BAS_Documents/the_star_of_bethlehem.pdf) or other places on the web.