

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM What Was It?

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The word astronomy comes from the Greek *astron*, “a star,” and *nomos*, “a law,” hence, “star law.” It signifies the laws, science, and study of the stars. There are about 6,500 stars in the whole of the heavens visible to the acute human eye.

For two millennia there has endured a fascination with and account of a star that riveted the attention of a party of wise men and led them as one from Persia to an insignificant little village in the eastern Mediterranean where they worshipped a baby named Jesus. The account, as recorded in Matthew 2:1-16, is understood well enough in every detail except for one—the star. What was it? This mysterious star has captured the imagination not only of theologians, but scientists, philosophers, artists, and other creative thinkers, especially astronomers, up to the present day. Contrary to popular tradition, the wise men did not come to a manger in a stable but to a house. They arrived in Judea at least six months after Jesus was born. It was the shepherds who visited the manger, after the glory of the Lord shone around them in the fields and announced His birth while the angels sang. The *sign* for the shepherds was the “Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12), while the *sign* to the wise men, or Magi, still in the east, was the “Star” (Mat. 2:2).

A number of theories have been proposed to explain the appearance of the enigmatic star. Each year, at literally hundreds of planetariums around the country, this profound question is tackled in programs that themselves have become a Christmas tradition. Even though combining science and religion is normally taboo, during the Christmas season these shows invariably oblige public demand and attempt to give a plausible explanation for the Star of Bethlehem—scientifically. Ironically, most of the explanations offered up would hardly pass peer review in the real world of science. In spite of this, and in light of the facts of the verses in Matthew, the star was a real object in the sky, that appeared, moved, and hovered in a manner sufficient to lead the Magi to the precise location where the child Jesus dwelt. Most planetariums accommodate this image by offering a wealth of astronomical possibilities as to what type of celestial object the star might have been. Among these theories the most com-

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mon are: a supernova, a bright meteor or a great comet, the planet Venus, and unusual planetary conjunction or alignment, and a UFO. However, all of these attempts to explain this remarkable historic phenomenon from a purely mechanistic or naturalistic thesis have met with serious circumstantial problems. No less is the fact that such objects in the sky cannot lead in the manner required according to Matthew's account. At least astronomers cannot be accused of making no effort to solve this mystery.

Finding all of these theories wanting, some show directors will cross a further threshold by abandoning the literal for the abstract, saying that the star was not a physical object but merely some esoteric omen described by prophets of the day. Others will suggest that the star was some kind of "spiritual light," outside the realm of science, being a matter of faith held by certain adherents, and said to be as subjective and inarguable as the First Amendment. Then a few will go even further yet, and resort to astrology, saying that the star was an astrological sign. Explanations from all these perspectives abound. In the end none of these details can adequately serve Matthew's account. Dismissing the star's incredulity, explanations are offered which withhold the key facts that inherently disprove their possibility. Hence, accompanying the Biblical heresy is the schizophrenia of trying to decide whether the planetarium shows should be entertainment or real science, a predicament that aggravates the already sticky dilemma of mixing science and religion, of introducing pseudo scientific additives.

In an attempt from a more "religious" perspective it has been suggested by some that the star was an angel, as evidenced by its apparent intelligent movement. However, even though there appears to be a close association between the stars and angels in the Bible, Matthew did not describe apparition as an angel, but a star. However intimately the two may be related, the fact that Matthew's second chapter mentions both angels and the star at the nativity would tend to further indicate that the star was not an angel but its own distinct manifestation. Luke's account seems to affirm this distinction.

If the account as revealed in Matthew's gospel is literally true, as the Bible believing Christian holds that it is, then the Star of Bethlehem seen by the wise men could not have been a natural apparition, nor an astrological or spiritual sign alone, or even an angel. The unique geometry of its movement in the sky and its ability to stand over and mark a single objective geographical point, such as the house where the Christ child dwelt, indicates that it was a literal visible supernatural sign given from on High and one that modern science or any other extra-biblical discipline will never be able to explain.

There remains yet one more avenue in our quest after the Star of Bethlehem that well deserves our attention. This one leads us to an entirely unique, but not new, understanding and conclusion consistent with the facts, and represents part of a recurrent theme that can be traced from one cover of the Bible to the other.

Our first clue is found in the Genesis record where God created the heaven and the earth. Light was present on the first day of creation, even though the sources of light in the physical heavens—the sun, moon, and stars—were not created until the fourth day. We can see that the first light was not what we would call “natural.” It must have been that supernatural display of the glory of God, which many times afterward accompanied His revelatory and redemptive activity. The encounter of Moses with God is exemplary. God revealed Himself to Moses in a “burning” bush by an unearthly supernatural light that did not consume the bush. Moses was apparently so attracted to the light that he asked God to show him more of His glory. When Moses came down from the mountain his own face glowed from being in God’s presence. As Moses led the people out of Egypt this same light-glory accompanied them in the wilderness and later in the Tabernacle. The ancient Hebrews called these appearances of God the *Shekinah*: the glory, radiance, presence or merely the “dwelling” of God with His people. This physical manifestation is also a reminder of the authority and superintendence of the omnipotent god over His creation. This same glory of God is mentioned many more time in the Psalms and the prophets. Subsequently, centuries passed during which the Shekinah remained absent from Israel—until the time of Christ.

Then it happened, like the missing piece of a cosmic jigsaw puzzle, a strange new light appeared in the East. Three gentile Persian astronomer-priests saw it in the sky, and they immediately recognized the overwhelming significance of this strange and wonderful aerial light. Somehow, perhaps through a vision or a dream, the Magi got the message that the King of the Jews, the Savior of mankind, was born. The intense wonderful light which accompanied God at creation; when He appeared to Moses and made his face to shine; that hovered over the Exodus and filled the Tabernacle with an exceeding illumination; and that blinded the prophets of old; now retuned after a hiatus of six centuries to herald the greatest event of all: the benevolent entry of His eternal Son into our time-bound universe as the first and only God-man in human history. Throughout the bible the Shekinah was an accompaniment that indicated the presence of the Lord and guided people as the Lord directed. It seems fitting that the Shekinah would appear to herald the birth of God the Son and bring “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” The extraordinary glory of God is the only reveal that completely fulfills

all the data presented in Matthew 2:1-12. On this occasion particularly, this special light was a most appropriate manifestation of divine majesty.

An amazing Bible prophecy of a “Star out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17) anticipated the nativity by over 1,400 years, and spoke of One who would one day hold the scepter of kingly rule over Israel. The same was announced by the Star of Bethlehem which was indeed “His Star” (Matthew 2:2). As we enter this “Holy Day” season we are reminded of what Peter long ago assured us, that in God’s written word, available to all in the Holy Scriptures, “We have a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). Jesus said: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). The prophets spoke of a time yet future, even from our contemporary prospect, that all who enter in to a personal relationship with the God of creation through the resurrected Jesus Christ have new life in the present, and will ultimately see the Shekinah glory continually. This is the identity and meaning of the Star of Bethlehem. Happy are the people to whom God has revealed Himself, to whom He has come, and unto whom He is the Lord. “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Quotable Quotes

The data were almost unbelievable.... There was only one other possible conclusion to draw—that the earth was at rest. This, of course, was preposterous.

—Bernard Jaffe, *Michelson and the Speed of Light* (Doubleday)

One-liners

Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak.

The 50-50-90 rule: Anytime you have a 50-50 chance of getting something right, there’s a 90% probability you’ll get it wrong.