

His Star in the East

From astrology to nativity: the role of the star in the Magi's journey to find the Messiah.

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in 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.'" Matthew 2:1-2, NASB

*Star Light Star bright,
The first star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight.*

So goes the *Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme* that many in their childhood repeated as they wistfully lay on their beds looking out the bedroom window at the sky above. From Disney to astronomy, stars fascinate the human mind and soul. But there are mystical and spiritual worldviews, ancient and modern, associated with stars, astrology and its attendant horoscopes being but one example. Stars can promote myths.

Among others, one that has accumulated around Christmas is that by night and by day from Babylon, or from places thereabouts, an ongoing star led three wise men or magicians to Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Christ child. Enduring frigid nights and blistering days and traveling by caravan on camels over desolate desserts, these ancient astrologers followed a star that first appeared in the east where they lived and practiced the occult arts, to the West where the infant (not baby) Jesus resided. The Christmas carol "We Three Kings" perpetuates the myth. The lyrics read:

First Stanza:

We three kings of Orient are;
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Chorus:

O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to Thy perfect light. **[1]**

Preachers too help to perpetuate the myth that to locate Him who was born King of the Jews, the wise men followed an ever present star. One has written:

The star of Bethlehem was a *star of guidance*. *This star guided the wise men through the desert and across great distances. It guided them to the Lord Jesus Christ.* [2]

Yet questions abound around this Christmas scenario. Is this understanding of the role played by the star too star-struck?

For example, Matthew records that the Magi first saw Jesus' star "**in the east**." Yet amazingly, it is recorded that they journeyed west! Perhaps this may be explained by taking "**in the east**" to refer to the star's position when it appeared. The Magi first observed it in the eastern sky. Or perhaps better, that "**in the east**" informs readers of the location of the Magi when initially they saw the star (Matthew 2:2, 9). Either way, whether Matthew recounted *the position of the star when it appeared* or *the place where the wise men were when they observed it*, the overriding question becomes, why did the star's appearance prompt them to commence a westward journey to seek out the Messiah? To answer the question, we might try to understand what the wise men saw and how it led them.

Variouly, it has been conjectured that the star was an appearance of Halley's Comet (*circa* 11 BC) or something like it (4 BC), an exceptional conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Venus (7 BC), or the abrupt emergence of a supernova. But such naturalistic explanations do not explain why the heavenly phenomena would have impressed the Magi (Hebrew *'ashshaphim*, meaning "viewers of the heavens."), who not only were students of the skies, but also experts in astrology and other occult arts of the East (See Daniel 2:10, 27; 4:7; 5:7.). Providing us with a glimpse into who they were and what they did, Isaiah chides Babylon to deliver itself from the divine judgment that the Lord was soon to send upon that nation. The prophet admonished them saying:

Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee. (Isaiah 47:13, KJV)

Consistent with Scripture's declaration that God is Creator, my belief is that He who "**created the heavens**" (Isaiah 45:18) also formed the signal star that appeared to the Magi prompting them to seek for the Messiah. But was that star an ever present phenomenon to them? Was it, to quote the Christmas carol, *westward leading, still proceeding*? I don't believe it. Unlike Disney, the Bible does not tell Christian believers to place their "wish upon a star."

The tense of the verbs "**we saw**" and "**had seen**" (aorist tense, Matthew 2:2, 9) suggests that like *a snapshot*, the star originally appeared to the Magi, but that for the greater part of their journey, their sight of the star was not continuous. [3] Upon arriving in Jerusalem, and after being interrogated and released by Herod, the star then reappeared and like *a motion picture* "**went on before them**" (imperfect tense, Matthew 2:9), guiding the Magi to the very house where with His parents, Joseph and Mary, the infant Jesus resided. For the last six miles of the last hours of their journey, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the appearance of the star was continuous. But for a period of several months to over a year and for a distance of five to six

hundred miles of travel from Babylon to Jerusalem, the guiding star was not. Why?

The answer lies in the fact that not only did these Magi study the stars, but more importantly, they also studied the Scriptures (probably made available to them by Diaspora Jews in Babylon during the 6th century BC), placing greater credibility and authority upon them than the writings native to their their own esoteric spirituality and culture (See Isaiah 2:6.). Hundreds of years before the star's appearance, the Hebrew prophets predicted that Messiah would be born the seed of Abraham, of the family of Judah, from the lineage of David and in the town of Bethlehem (Genesis 12:1-4; 49:10; Psalm 132:11; Micah 5:2). That's why despite the position or constancy of the star's phenomenal appearance, the Magi journeyed west. They were not guided by what they saw in the sky, but by what they studied in the Scriptures. Above all else, they journeyed by faith in God's Word. Because of the Word they journeyed west!

ENDNOTES

[1] Emphasis added, John H. Hopkins, "We Three Kings," *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship*, Tom Fettke, Senior Editor (Word/Integrity, 1977): 288. A.K.A. "We Three Kings of Orient Are" or "The Quest of the Magi," the hymn's author organized an elaborate holiday pageant in 1857, in New York City, that featured this hymn. Later in 1872 Hopkins was ordained as an Episcopalian clergyman.

[2] Emphasis added, D. James Kennedy, "Following the Star," *Christmas Stories for the Heart*, Alice Gray, Editor (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1977): 136.

[3] "The aorist tense 'presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence.' This contrasts with the present and imperfect, which portray the action as an ongoing process. It may be helpful to think of the aorist as taking a snapshot of the action while the imperfect (like the present) takes a motion picture, portraying the action as it unfolds." The aorist can be viewed as "ingressive," that "there is no implication that the action continues." See Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000): 239, 241.