

= Star of Bethlehem =

The Star of Bethlehem , also called the Christmas Star , revealed the birth of Jesus to the Biblical Magi , and later led them to Bethlehem , according to Christian tradition . The star appears only in the nativity story of the Gospel of Matthew , where astrologers from the east are inspired by the star to travel to Jerusalem . There they meet King Herod of Judea , and ask where the king of the Jews had been born . Herod , following a verse from the Book of Micah interpreted as a prophecy , directs them to Bethlehem , to the south of Jerusalem . The star leads them to Jesus ' home in the town , where they worship him and give him gifts . The wise men are then given a divine warning not to return to Herod so they return home by a different route .

Many Christians see the star as a miraculous sign to mark the birth of the Christ (or Messiah) . Some theologians claimed that the star fulfilled a prophecy , known as the Star Prophecy . Astronomers have made several attempts to link the star to unusual astronomical events , such as a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus , a comet or a supernova .

Many modern scholars do not consider the story to be describing a historical event but a pious fiction created by the author of the Gospel of Matthew .

The subject is a favorite at planetarium shows during the Christmas season , although the Biblical account describes Jesus with a broader Greek word , which can mean either " infant " or " child " (paidon) , rather than the more specific word for infant (brephos) , possibly implying that some time has passed since the birth . The visit is traditionally celebrated on Epiphany (January 6) in Western Christianity .

= = Matthew 's narrative = =

In the Gospel of Matthew account , the Magi (often translated as " wise men " , but more accurately astrologers or astronomers) arrive at the court of Herod in Jerusalem and tell the king of a star which signifies the birth of the King of the Jews :

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king , behold , wise men from the East came to Jerusalem , saying , Where is He who has been born King of the Jews ? For we have seen His star in the East [or at its rising] 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 .

Herod is " troubled " , not because of the appearance of the star , but because the Magi have told him that a " king of the Jews " had been born , which he understands to refer to the Messiah , a leader of the Jewish people whose coming was believed to be foretold in scripture . So he asks his advisors where the Messiah would be born . They answer Bethlehem , birthplace of King David , and quote the prophet Micah . The king passes this information along to the Magi .

Then Herod , when he had secretly called the wise men , 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 , till it came and stood over where the young Child was . When they saw the star , they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy . And when they had come into the house , they saw the young Child with Mary His mother , and fell down and worshiped Him . And when they had opened their treasures , they presented gifts to Him : gold , frankincense , and myrrh .

Matthew 's account suggests that the Magi knew from the star that the " king of the Jews " had been born even before they arrived in Jerusalem . They present Jesus with gifts of gold , frankincense , and myrrh , and as verse 11 describes , they find the mother and child not in a manger but in a house . In a dream , they are warned not to return to Jerusalem , so they leave for their own country by another route . When Herod realizes he has been tricked , he orders the execution of all male children in Bethlehem " two years old and younger , " based on the age the child could be in regard to the information the magi had given him concerning the time the star first

appeared . Joseph , warned in a dream , takes his family to Egypt for their safety . The Gospel links the escape to a verse from scripture , which it interprets as a prophecy : " Out of Egypt I called my son . " This was a reference to the departure of the Hebrews from Egypt under Moses , so the quote suggests that Matthew saw the life of Jesus as recapitulating the story of the Jewish people , with Judea representing Egypt and Herod standing in for pharaoh . After Herod dies , Joseph and his family return from Egypt , and settle in Nazareth in Galilee . This is also said to be a fulfillment of a prophecy (" He will be called a Nazorean , " (NRSV) for which no scriptural reference is known . The word " Nazareth " is related to the word " netzer " which means " sprout " , and which some Bible commentators think refers to Isaiah 11 : 1 , " And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse , and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit . " (ESV) .

= = Explanations = =

= = = Pious fiction = = =

Many scholars who see the Gospel Nativity stories as later apologetic accounts created to establish the Messianic status of Jesus , regard the Star of Bethlehem as a pious fiction . Aspects of Matthew 's account which have raised questions of the historical event include : Matthew is the only one of the four gospels which mentions either the Star of Bethlehem or the Magi . In Mark 6 : 1 @-@ 4 , the author of the Gospel of Mark , considered by modern text scholars to be the oldest of the Gospels , does not appear to be aware of the Bethlehem nativity story . A character in the Gospel of John states that Jesus is from Galilee , and not Bethlehem . The Gospels often described Jesus as " of Nazareth , " but never as " of Bethlehem " . Scholars suggest that Jesus was born in Nazareth and that the Bethlehem nativity narratives reflect a desire by the Gospel writers to present his birth as the fulfillment of prophecy . The Matthew account conflicts with that given in the Gospel of Luke , in which the family of Jesus already live in Nazareth , travel to Bethlehem for the census , and return home almost immediately .

Matthew 's description of the miracles and portents attending the birth of Jesus can be compared to stories concerning the birth of Augustus (63 BC) . Linking a birth to the first appearance of a star was consistent with a popular belief that each person 's life was linked to a particular star . Magi and astronomical events were linked in the public mind by the visit to Rome of a delegation of magi at the time of a spectacular appearance of Halley 's Comet in AD 66 , about the time the Gospel of Matthew was being composed . This delegation was led by King Tiridates of Armenia , who came seeking confirmation of his title from Emperor Nero . Ancient historian Dio Cassius wrote that , " The King did not return by the route he had followed in coming , " a line echoed in Matthew 's account .

= = = Fulfillment of prophecy = = =

The ancients believed that astronomical phenomena were connected to terrestrial events . Miracles were routinely associated with the birth of important people , including the Hebrew patriarchs , as well as Greek and Roman heroes .

The Star of Bethlehem is traditionally linked to the Star Prophecy in the Book of Numbers :

Although clearly intended to refer to a time that was long past , since the kingdom of Moab had long ceased to exist by the time the Gospels were being written , this passage had become widely seen as a reference to the coming of a Messiah . It was , for example , cited by Josephus , who believed it referred to Emperor Vespasian . Origen , one of the most influential early Christian theologians , connected this prophecy with the Star of Bethlehem :

If , then , at the commencement of new dynasties , or on the occasion of other important events , there arises a comet so called , or any similar celestial body , why should it be matter of wonder that at the birth of Him who was to introduce a new doctrine to the human race , and to make known His teaching not only to Jews , but also to Greeks , and to many of the barbarous nations besides , a star should have arisen ? Now I would say , that with respect to comets there is no prophecy in

circulation to the effect that such and such a comet was to arise in connection with a particular kingdom or a particular time ; but with respect to the appearance of a star at the birth of Jesus there is a prophecy of Balaam recorded by Moses to this effect : There shall arise a star out of Jacob , and a man shall rise up out of Israel .

Origen suggested that the Magi may have decided to travel to Jerusalem when they " conjectured that the man whose appearance had been foretold along with that of the star , had actually come into the world " .

The Magi are sometimes called " kings " because of the belief that they fulfill prophecies in Isaiah and Psalms concerning a journey to Jerusalem by gentile kings . Isaiah mentions gifts of gold and incense . In the Septuagint , the Greek translation of the Old Testament probably used by Matthew , these gifts are given as gold and frankincense , similar to Matthew 's " gold , frankincense , and myrrh . " The gift of myrrh symbolizes mortality , according to Origen .

While Origen argued for a naturalistic explanation , John Chrysostom viewed the star as purely miraculous : " How then , tell me , did the star point out a spot so confined , just the space of a manger and shed , unless it left that height and came down , and stood over the very head of the young child ? And at this the evangelist was hinting when he said , " Lo , the star went before them , till it came and stood over where the young Child was . "

= = = Astronomical object = = =

Although magi (Greek ?????) is usually translated as " wise men , " in this context it probably means " astronomer " or " astrologer " . The involvement of astrologers in the story of the birth of Jesus was problematic for the early Church , because they condemned astrology as demonic ; a widely cited explanation was that of Tertullian , who suggested that astrology was allowed ' only until the time of the Gospel ' .

= = = Planetary conjunction = = =

In 1614 , German astronomer Johannes Kepler determined that a series of three conjunctions of the planets Jupiter and Saturn occurred in the year 7 BC . He argued (incorrectly) that a planetary conjunction could create a nova , which he linked to the Star of Bethlehem . Modern calculations show that there was a gap of nearly a degree (approximately twice a diameter of the moon) between the planets , so these conjunctions were not visually impressive . An ancient almanac has been found in Babylon which covers the events of this period , but does not indicate that the conjunctions were of any special interest . In the 20th century , Prof. Karlis Kaufmanis , an astronomer , argued that this was an astronomical event where Jupiter and Saturn were in a triple conjunction in the constellation Pisces . Archaeologist and Assyriologist Simo Parpola has also suggested this explanation .

In 3 ? 2 BC , there was a series of seven conjunctions , including three between Jupiter and Regulus and a strikingly close conjunction between Jupiter and Venus near Regulus on June 17 , 2 BC . " The fusion of two planets would have been a rare and awe @-@ inspiring event " , according to Roger Sinnott . Another Venus ? Jupiter conjunction occurred earlier in August , 3 BC . These events however occurred after the generally accepted date of 4 BC for the death of Herod . Since the conjunction would have been seen in the west at sunset it could not have led the magi south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem .

= = = Comet = = =

Other writers suggest that the star was a comet . Halley 's Comet was visible in 12 BC and another object , possibly a comet or nova , was seen by Chinese and Korean stargazers in about 5 BC . This object was observed for over seventy days with no movement recorded . Ancient writers described comets as " hanging over " specific cities , just as the Star of Bethlehem was said to have " stood over " the " place " where Jesus was (the town of Bethlehem) . However , this is generally thought

unlikely as in ancient times comets were generally seen as bad omens . The comet explanation has been recently promoted by Colin Nicholl . His theory involves a hypothetical comet which could have appeared in 6 BC .

===== Supernova =====

A recent (2005) hypothesis is that the star of Bethlehem was a supernova or hypernova occurring in the nearby Andromeda Galaxy . Although it is difficult to detect a supernova remnant in another galaxy , or obtain an accurate date of when it occurred , supernovae remnants have been detected in Andromeda .

===== Heliacal rising =====

The Magi told Herod that they saw the star " in the East , " or according to some translations , " at its rising " , which may imply the routine appearance of a constellation , or an asterism . One theory interprets the phrase in Matthew 2 : 2 , " in the east , " as an astrological term concerning a " heliacal rising . " This translation was proposed by Edersheim and Heinrich Voigt , among others . The view was rejected by the philologist Franz Boll (1867 ? 1924) . Two modern translators of ancient astrological texts insist that the text does not use the technical terms for either a heliacal or an acronycal rising of a star . However , one concedes that Matthew may have used layman 's terms for a rising .

===== Double occultation =====

Astronomer Michael R. Molnar argues that the " star in the east " refers to an astronomical event with astrological significance in the context of ancient Greek astrology . He suggests a link between the Star of Bethlehem and a double occultation of Jupiter by the moon on March 20 and April 17 of 6 BC in Aries , particularly the second occultation on April 17 . Occultations of planets by the moon are quite common , but Firmicus Maternus , an astrologer to Roman Emperor Constantine , wrote that an occultation of Jupiter in Aries was a sign of the birth of a divine king . He argues that Aries rather than Pisces was the zodiac symbol for Judea , a fact that would affect previous interpretations of astrological material . Molnar 's theory was debated by scientists , theologians , and historians during a colloquium on the Star of Bethlehem at the Netherlands ? University of Groningen in October 2014 . Harvard astronomer Owen Gingerich supports Molnar 's explanation but noted technical questions . " The gospel story is one in which King Herod was taken by surprise , " said Gingerich . " So it wasn 't that there was suddenly a brilliant new star sitting there that anybody could have seen [but] something more subtle . " Astronomer David A. Weintraub says , " If Matthew 's wise men actually undertook a journey to search for a newborn king , the bright star didn 't guide them ; it only told them when to set out . "

The events were quite close to the sun and would not have been visible to the naked eye .

===== Jupiter 's annual cycle =====

Another theory connects the star to a series of unique , but generally unspectacular celestial events involving the planet Jupiter . Babylonian astronomers sometimes referred to the planet as MUL.BABBAR , meaning the " white star . " The celestial events , which were centered on the planet 's annual cycle , could have been symbolically associated with Judaism and the Messiah . This conception of the star has been referred to as ? a serious study of what could have been a messianic Jewish perspective concerning the heavens two millennia ago . ?

===== Regulus , Jupiter , and Venus =====

Attorney Frederick Larson examined the biblical account in the Gospel of Matthew , chapter 2 and

found the following nine qualities of Bethlehem 's Star : It signified birth , it signified kingship , it was related to the Jewish nation , and it rose " in the East " ; King Herod had not been aware of it ; it appeared at an exact time ; it endured over time ; and , according to Matthew , it was in front of the Magi when they traveled south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem , and then it stopped over Bethlehem .

Using astronomy software , and an article written by astronomer Craig Chester based on the work of Ernest Martin , Larson thinks all nine characteristics of the Star of Bethlehem are found in events that took place in the skies of 3 @-@ 2 BC . Highlights include a triple conjunction of Jupiter , called the king planet , with the fixed star Regulus , called the king star , starting in September 3 BC . Larson believes that may be the time of Jesus ' conception .

By June of 2 BC , nine months later , the human conception period , Jupiter had continued moving in its orbit around the sun and appeared in close conjunction with Venus with Venus in June of 2 BC . In Hebrew Jupiter is called " Sedeq " , meaning " righteousness " , a term also used for the Messiah , and suggested that because the planet Venus represents love and fertility , so Chester had suggested astrologers would have viewed the close conjunction of Jupiter and Venus as indicating a coming new king of Israel , and Herod would have taken them seriously . Astronomer Dave Reneke independently found the June 2 BC planetary conjunction , and noted it would have appeared as a " bright beacon of light " .

Jupiter next continued to move and then it stopped in its apparent retrograde motion on December 25 of 2 BC over the town of Bethlehem . Since planets in their orbits have a " stationary point " , a planet moves eastward through the stars but " After it passes the opposite point in the sky from the sun , it appears to slow , come to a full stop , and move backward (westward) for some weeks . Again it slows , stops , and resumes its eastward course , " said Chester . The date of December 25 that Jupiter appeared to stop while in retrograde took place in the season of Hanukkah , and is the date later chosen to celebrate Christmas .

= = Relating the star historically to Jesus ' birth = =

If the story of the Star of Bethlehem described an actual event , it might identify the year Jesus was born . The Gospel of Matthew describes the birth of Jesus as taking place when Herod was king . According to Josephus , Herod died after a lunar eclipse and before a Passover Feast . The eclipse is usually identified as the eclipse of March 13 , 4 BC . Other scholars suggested dates in 5 BC , because it allows seven months for the events Josephus documented between the lunar eclipse and the Passover than the 29 days allowed by lunar eclipse in 4 BC . Others suggest it was an eclipse in 1 BC . The narrative implies that Jesus was born sometime between the first appearance of the star and the appearance of the Magi at Herod 's court . That the king is said to have ordered the execution of boys two years of age and younger , implies that the Star of Bethlehem appeared within the preceding two years . Some scholars date the birth of Jesus as 6 ? 4 BC , while others suggest Jesus ' birth was in 3 / 2 BC .

The Gospel of Luke says the census from Caesar Augustus took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria . Tipler suggests this took place in AD 6 , nine years after the death of Herod , and that the family of Jesus left Bethlehem shortly after the birth . Some scholars explain the apparent disparity as an error on the part of the author of the Gospel of Luke , concluding that he was more concerned with creating a symbolic narrative than a historical account , and was either unaware of , or indifferent to , the chronological difficulty .

However , there is some debate among Bible translators about the correct reading of Luke 2 : 2 . Instead of translating the registration as taking place " when " Quirinius was governor of Syria , some versions translate it as " before " or use " before " as an alternative , which Harold Hoehner , F.F. Bruce , Ben Witherington and others have suggested may be the correct translation . While not in agreement , Emil Schürer also acknowledged that such a translation can be justified grammatically . According to Josephus , the tax census conducted by the Roman senator Quirinius particularly irritated the Jews , and was one of the causes of the Zealot movement of armed resistance to Rome . From this perspective , Luke may have been trying to differentiate the census at the time of Jesus ' birth from the tax census mentioned in Acts 5 : 37 that took place under

Quirinius at a later time . One ancient writer identified the census at Jesus ' birth , not with taxes , but with a universal pledge of allegiance to the emperor .

Jack Finegan noted some early writers ' reckoning of the regnal years of Augustus are the equivalent to 3 / 2 BC , or 2 BC or later for the birth of Jesus , including Irenaeus (3 / 2 BC) , Clement of Alexandria (3 / 2 BC) , Tertullian (3 / 2 BC) , Julius Africanus (3 / 2 BC) , Hippolytus of Rome (3 / 2 BC) , Hippolytus of Thebes (3 / 2 BC) , Origen (3 / 2 BC) , Eusebius of Caesarea (3 / 2 BC) , Epiphanius of Salamis (3 / 2 BC) , Cassiodorus Senator (3 BC) , Paulus Orosius (2 BC) , Dionysus Exiguus (1 BC) , and Chronographer of the Year 354 (AD 1) . Finegan places the death of Herod in 1 BC , and says if Jesus was born two years or less before Herod the Great died , the birth of Jesus would have been in 3 or 2 BC . Finegan also notes the Alogi reckoned Christ 's birth with the equivalent of 4 BC or AD 9 .

= = Religious interpretations = =

= = = Eastern Orthodoxy = = =

In the Orthodox Church , the Star of Bethlehem is interpreted as a miraculous event of symbolic and pedagogical significance , regardless of whether it coincides with a natural phenomenon ; a sign sent by God to lead the Magi to the Christ Child . This is illustrated in the Troparion of the Nativity :

In Orthodox Christian iconography , the Star of Bethlehem is often depicted not as golden , but as a dark aureola , a semicircle at the top of the icon , indicating the Uncreated Light of Divine grace , with a ray pointing to " the place where the young child lay " (Matt 2 : 9) . Sometimes the faint image of an angel is drawn inside the aureola .

= = = Mormonism = = =

Mormons believe that the Star of Bethlehem was an actual astronomical event visible the world over . In the Book of Mormon , which they believe contains writings of ancient prophets , Samuel the Lamanite prophesies that a new star will appear as a sign that Jesus has been born , and Nephi later writes about the fulfillment of this prophecy .

= = = Jehovah 's Witnesses = = =

Among Jehovah 's Witnesses the Star of Bethlehem is seen as a product of Satan , rather than a sign from God , since the star led the astrologers to Jerusalem where they met King Herod 's plan to kill Jesus .

= = = Seventh @-@ day Adventist = = =

In The Desire of Ages , Ellen White states " That star was a distant company of shining angels , but of this the wise men were ignorant . "

= = Depiction in art = =

Paintings and other pictures of the Adoration of the Magi may include a depiction of the star in some form . In the fresco by Giotto di Bondone , it is depicted as a comet . In the tapestry of the subject designed by Edward Burne @-@ Jones (and in the related watercolour) , the star is held by an angel .

The colourful star lantern known as a paról is a cherished and ubiquitous symbol of the holiday for Filipinos , its design and light recalling the star . In its basic form , the paról has five points and two " tails " that evoke rays of light pointing the way to the stable , and candles inside the lanterns have been superseded by electric illumination .

In the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem , a silver star with 14 undulating rays marks the location traditionally claimed to be that of Jesus ' birth .

= = In popular culture = =

" The Star " was an episode of The Twilight Zone during its run in the 1980s , based on the science fiction short story " The Star " by English writer Arthur C. Clarke .

A distant space ship comes across a supernova that was calculated to have occurred in approximately 3,000BC , at a distance of 3 @, @ 000 light @-@ years . A well @-@ developed civilization was eradicated by the supernova and one of the astronauts , who was also a priest , had a crisis of faith about why God would let such a civilization die to herald the birth of Christ . Another astronaut shows him a recording from that civilization populace stating that they realized they were at the peak of their time and had to make way for a new people . They had left their art and music behind as a legacy to the future generations .

= = = Christmas carols = = =

The star is often alluded to in Christmas carols about the Magi . For example , " We Three Kings " has the refrain :