

Star of Wonder, Star of Night: What Do We Know About the Christmas Star?

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ThinkingAboutTheBible.com

Dec 7, 2021

Last night as I pulled the trash can to the curb, the bright crescent moon was situated right under the planet Jupiter. It had drawn my attention because it was an unusual configuration. Like the Psalmist, I'm fascinated by the night sky. It does indeed "declare the glory of God."

The second chapter of Matthew tells us about a group of *magi* (Persian astrologers/scientists) who also studied the night sky. Scripture doesn't give the details, but in some way, they recognized a message in a particular star (designated *His star*). The message correctly pointed to the birth of the Jewish Messiah.¹ What exactly did they see?

In the 1st-century world, the word *star* (Gr. *aster*) could refer to any point of light in the sky including planets, comets, or supernovae (exploding stars). Many have tried to pin a naturalistic cause on the phenomenon. Some common explanations are that the magi's "star" could have been a(n)...

- Comet or supernova – These are rare, but definitely attract attention.
- Conjunction – In this event, two or more celestial bodies appear very close to each other (as when I saw the moon and Jupiter together). There were several notable conjunctions around the time of Jesus' birth.
- Obscure astrological event noticed by the magi – However, if this were a random event, it certainly was a coincidence that the message was correct.

Isn't it interesting that so many (including Christians) feel the need to make the star a natural event? Certainly, God often uses natural things to accomplish His purposes. He can do whatever He wants.

But could the star have been supernatural—a miracle performed by God specifically to herald the birth of His Son? After all He had just performed the "Grand Miracle" of sending the 2nd Person of the Trinity to be born of a virgin!

Let's look at some things God's Word tells us about the star...

1. The magi saw the star in the East. Some cite a problem here in that the magi were in the East and would have been looking toward the West to see it over Jerusalem. One explanation is that the star appeared in different places and not continually. At first, they saw it in the East, then at a later time, it appeared again and led them westward toward Jerusalem.

¹ Possibly, they had read Numbers 21:17. Also remember, Daniel had been made the head of "Magi University" centuries before and it's likely he would have taught them much from the Scriptures.

A better explanation is that the idiom “in the East” was used to mean “in its rising.” Literally then, they noticed the new star “when it first rose” or “when it first appeared.” And since they obviously knew the prophetic Old Testament significance of the star, they would also know that the event was prophesied to happen around Jerusalem. Would God use the forbidden practice of astrology to give the message to the magi? I’ll leave that to the theologians, but I believe in some way God made the meaning of the star clear to them.

2. Not everyone saw or noted the star. For example, Herod had to ask the magi what time they had seen the star.² From this I think we can also assume that Herod hadn’t heard anyone talking about an unusual sign in the heavens. Furthermore, we’re not told that anyone was intended to see the star except for the magi.

3. The star wasn’t seen continuously. After speaking with Herod, it seems that the magi began to see the star again. Their rejoicing seems to indicate that the sight of the star was at this time a “new event” and they hadn’t seen it since the first appearance. The phenomenon now was *moving* to lead them to the “Child.” It eventually hovered over the house where Jesus’ family was now living. I don’t believe a real star, comet, or conjunction fits the actions described here.³ I also tend to think that if everyone could see the star at this time, it would have caused quite a stir, and there is no record of such. Thus, I believe the star was likely a supernatural event only observed by those who needed to see it. *Miracles are okay in my worldview because they are okay in God’s Word.*

Surely, the Creator of billions of galaxies each with billions of stars could create a special sign for the birth of the Savior. He could also make sure that in His providence all the pieces of history would fall into place so that I would hear the Good News that Jesus was born specifically to die for my sins. God was already loving me, even as the magi were trekking westward to see for themselves the One who would save us from our sins.

My apologies if all of this messes up anyone’s Christmas plays or manger scenes. (To add fuel to the fire, the magi’s visit was probably months after Jesus’ birth.⁴) But despite all of this, I’ll still picture the Baby surrounded by shepherds and magi with a bright star streaming its rays on the little stable.

For more on the magi, see “Those Wise Men Again” at TATB.

² Matthew 2

³ There is a biblical precedent of a supernatural sign in the sky. The Israelites were led through the wilderness by a daytime cloud and a nighttime fire that hovered before them (Exodus 13).

⁴ The “child” instead of the “baby.” The family was now in a house, not a stable. When Herod learned the time of the star, he ordered boys under 2 years-old to be killed.