

**Star of Wonder**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

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If there were words to a Christmas carol I knew by heart growing up it was these: “Star of Wonder, Star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to Thy perfect light.” *We Three Kings* is one of the biggies, especially in Christmas pageants; the kings arrive at the manger, flanked by shepherds as they present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Today I would like to give you some background to this story and suggest a new and quite conceivable way to explain the Bethlehem Star. Some things only come by digging in and doing the hard work. Fast-food religion will not provide that. And then next week I want us to continue this conversation on a different level. If today is the “what” and “how” of this issue, next week will lead us to the “why” and “so what” questions, the “what does it have to do with us” question, and it has a lot to do with us.

**First**, they were not kings; the Magi were astrologers who read the heavens and other mystical works to make sense of the world, both earthly and heavenly.

**Second**, they didn’t show up at the birth; they came later. We’ll get to that in a minute, but suffice it to say that is the reason that we are talking about the Magi arriving in Bethlehem after Christmas, during the season of Epiphany.

**Third**, when they did show up we don’t know how many of them there were. The song says three presumably because three types of gifts were mentioned – gold, frankincense and myrrh. But two could have given those types of gifts just as well as ten could have. For sure they came in a caravan, the Magi accompanied by all manner of other helpers for their travel.

**Fourth**, the most logical place in the “east” where Magi were active is Babylon, what we would now know as Baghdad in Iraq. They travelled about 550

miles from Babylon to Jerusalem and that took a caravan between thirty and forty days.

**Fifth**, and strangely, there was a pretty significant Jewish population in Babylon left over from the exile, and the Jews knew all about the Magi. And here is the interesting thing: The Magi were routinely mistrusted by the Jews and later the Christians. They were astrologers all mixed up with hocus pocus. So the simple fact that a story about Gentile Magi leaving their home to follow a star to search for the Jewish Messiah was included as a primary testimony in Matthew's Gospel is astounding; there are a hundred reasons NOT to include them in a good Jewish or Christian story that is meant to be taken seriously. That the Magi were included lends real historicity to that record. You don't include something controversial like that unless it actually happened.

**Sixth**, we have records of other Magi leaving Babylon to follow astronomical events in search of other star risings (66 BC). So this was not an unprecedented event. Magi did that sort of thing,

but not often and not without really good reason. I mean, who would travel far to observe some astronomical phenomenon, like, for instance, a full solar eclipse in 2016? Whole groups from China traveling to Columbia? Not so unusual after all.

**Seventh**, the Gospel of Matthew is a type of literature, a genre, called a historical/theological biography. That is, the book is rooted in history but is making a theological statement the whole time. It has a historical framework but is telling its stories in the interest of inspiring faith. So history is not beside the point, but everything that is shared is meant to proclaim the message of God and Christ.

**Eighth**, the established time of Jesus' birth is off. It was miscalculated by a monk who missed some key items. The real date is more like 5-6 BC. Ironic, yes? Jesus was really born before time as we know it marks his birth – at zero! But this is very important, as we shall see, as you calculate the appearance of the star.

**Ninth**, there have been three main ways the Magi star narrative has been interpreted throughout Christian history: 1) The star that appeared was a supernatural phenomenon in the sky. 2) The narrative of the star was just that, a story to lend beauty and significance to a remarkable birth. 3) The star rising was a natural phenomenon that can be explained through astronomy. Those of us who have been around a while have heard all of those or combinations of all of those. For myself, and as you will soon discover, I come down on the side of an actual historical event, but one that is laden with theological meaning.

**Tenth**, the Magi narrative fits perfectly with the actual closing years of the reign of King Herod the Great. It is well documented by the Jewish Historian Josephus and others that in his final years he was exceptionally cruel, paranoid and capable of the most terrible atrocities. He had ten wives and children by all of them. He killed two of those wives and some of his sons – all seen to be rivals to his power.

As he was about to transfer his rule to a successor the story of a new King of the Jews arriving on the scene absolutely set him off. That was his title, given by the Romans – the King of the Jews. When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem Herod and indeed the whole city, had already seen the phenomenon in the sky. Herod had consulted with all his religious advisors who counseled him about the witness of the scriptures and Bethlehem. When speaking with the Magi he spoke with them about this new king to be born in Bethlehem, asking them to find the child and let him know who and where he was so he could bring tribute. He had no intention of bringing a tribute more than the sword.

The historical time frame of the closing of the reign of Herod and the birth of Jesus in 5-6 BC coincides perfectly. The Magi saw the star rising in the East as a sign of a divine birth. After equipping themselves for the caravan and the journey itself their arrival in Bethlehem would *not* have been during Jesus' infancy, but later, somewhere within the first year of his life.

The Magi pay tribute to Jesus the toddler and his family, who have moved out of the livestock pen or guest room into a house, perhaps with relatives. People have left Bethlehem after the census and returned home, but having a newborn Mary and Joseph stayed on a while. When the Magi returned by another way, not back through Jerusalem, Herod became enraged and then ordered the slaughter of all the infants two years and younger, casting a large net to liquidate his Jewish king rival. This was not uncharacteristic for Herod. It was exactly in character. And of course, Joseph was warned in a dream that the Holy Family should escape and they did – no doubt through the Gaza strip down into to Egypt, becoming political refugees and receiving sanctuary as strangers until it was safe to return after Herod's death.

There's your background. Now hold on to your hats. What about the star itself? As people tried to prove the historicity of the star they calculated when certain repeating phenomena could have taken place at the time when Jesus was born. Here are the problems with all of those attempts:

1. They had the birth date of Jesus wrong so all their star or planet calculations were off.
2. When they posited the combination of two planets coming together to make conjunction, usually Jupiter and Saturn (such as in 7BC), that conjunction does not continue in the pattern described in Matthew – rising, heading west, descending southerly on Bethlehem.
3. Some have said it was a Nova or Supernova, exploding star.
4. Some have attributed this to meteors – but again, they are relatively small and short lived, often not indicating any direction.

And now here it is, the thing I want us to chew on. There is one landmark study, the *tour de force* of our generation, that deals with the Star of Bethlehem. The researcher and author is Colin Nicholl of Northern Ireland. His book is *The Great Christ Comet* (2015). Nicholl has his Ph.D in New Testament from Cambridge. And most importantly, the collaborators in his voluminous study represent a who's who from the scientific astronomy community, especially those who specialize in

comets – cometography. His Biblical acumen combined with the astronomical detail is somewhat daunting. All of the hard science research is included.

I want to distill this down for you and summarize the convincing fruit of all of his labor. Comets orbit through our solar system in short or long arcs and appear on a regular schedule – like Haley’s Comet, for example. And of all the comets that are visible from earth – close enough, near enough to the sun, with large enough tails – there is a class of comets set apart from all others by their sheer magnificence and they are called the “great comets.” These are clearly visible in the nighttime and sometimes daytime sky.

Exactly at the time of Jesus’ birth, one of the Great Comets – the sixth brightest among all comets – arose in the eastern sky – east of Babylon – marking the “great birth” that sent the ancient astrologers, the Magi, preparing their caravan. This comet not only rose in the east, but its trajectory continued “westward leading” toward Jerusalem for the

duration of the caravan. And after meeting with Herod they departed most likely at night and headed south toward Bethlehem (which they already knew) and followed the comet as it was setting on the horizon – tail up – right over the house where Jesus was with his mother. They knew Bethlehem, but not the house, so they were filled with great joy. The Caravan pulled into the City of David and the astrologers from Babylon dismounted, entered the house and presented their gifts to the infant King of the Jews.

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And so the Bethlehem star was an omen to the Magi, from its rising in the East, proceeding Westward to Jerusalem and then setting in Bethlehem. The outer form and signs of nature marked the most phenomenal occurrence that would send Gentile astrologers packing on a 550 mile pilgrimage following a huge moving light in the sky.

The Great Christ comet correlates in an uncanny way with the story of the Magi that Matthew presents, Magi that normally wouldn't show up in any Jewish or Christian story. And why? Because this was an actual, historical event, not only a mythical sign.

This week you can go on the Broadway web site and review all this. And then you can come next week to worship prepared to ask the even harder questions of faith we will be exploring:

How does God show us the way today?

How do we know when the star is rising?

What signs give us a compelling call to follow today?

Is there a conflict between trusting in signs and living by faith?

How can I become a star-follower today and in what way?

“Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to Thy perfect light.”