

**What would an astrologer want to know about the Christmas story,
but what was that whole thing about some star—
and who were those three astrologers that followed it?**

STAR OF WONDER

By Judith Goldberg, MFA



*“We three kings of Orient are;
bearing gifts, we traverse afar...
following yonder star”*

The Christmas story is one of the best known in history. Thanks to mass media, the details are familiar to even the most non-Christian among us—a donkey ride to Bethlehem, a crowded inn, a lowly manger, an angel, some shepherds and wise men, and that miraculous, yet enigmatic star. But is it fact or fiction? Despite two millennia of speculation, no one knows for certain when Jesus was born. Bible scholars, historians and astronomers have placed the event anywhere from 7 to 1 BC, based on circumstantial evidence and on a reading of the celestial map—that “star of wonder”.

The two biblical accounts of the Nativity are from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Key elements differ in each. The authors, writing between 50 and 70 AD, in the absence of eye witness accounts, relied heavily on oral tradition and hearsay, not to mention embellishment. In fact, the entire Christian myth appears to have been borrowed from pagan sources. Numerous religious figureheads in a variety of cultures which pre-date Christianity laid claim to hauntingly similar divine parentage and destinies. Of particular interest is Mithra, the man-god deity of the Middle Eastern cult of Zoroaster, who was born of a virgin in a stable on December 25th around 600 BC. His resurrection was celebrated at Easter. The one element unique to the Christian nativity may be that ubiquitous star.

Historical Background

Two historical markers, the Roman census and the death of King Herod, allow us to hone in on the time frame. In the year 2 BC Rome celebrated the 750th year since its founding and the 25th jubilee year of the reign of Caesar Augustus. In this time of peace and prosperity, Augustus was addressed as the “Prince of Peace” (Sound familiar?) and given the title, “Pater Patriae”, or “Father of the Country”. In the prior year, 3 BC, a decree went out establishing a universal census whereby the entire Roman people would register their approval of the Emperor receiving this title. In the outlying provinces, subjects were required to travel to the city of their ancestry. In late summer or early fall, Mary and Joseph headed for Bethlehem.

At this time, Herod the Great was the much despised King of Judaea. Scholars have traditionally placed the time of Jesus’ birth before 4 BC, based on a statement in first century historian Flavius Josephus’ “Antiquities of the Jews” that Herod died in 4 BC. A recent discovery, however, has revealed a copying error of Josephus’ manuscript, dating from 1552. Prior volumes give a date of 1 BC. Josephus wrote that Herod died after a lunar eclipse and was buried before Passover. Eclipses, which were considered portents of kingly deaths, are also, due to their rarity, extremely useful date minders. There were lunar eclipses in March of 5 BC (total), March of 4 BC (partial) and January of 1 BC (total). The partial eclipse must be ruled out as the moon was described as “red with the blood” of three rabbis Herod had recently murdered. March dates are unrealistic because before burial an official mourning period of 30 days was required and Herod’s entourage then took several weeks to carry his body to a distant tomb. Passover occurs in late March or early April. So, Herod most likely passed in early 1 BC.

The Star of Bethlehem

As significant as the star is to the mysticism of the nativity, it is mentioned only once in the Bible (by Matthew), yet some clues exist from which to establish its identity. At the time, astrology (indistinguishable from astronomy) was believed to be a reliable scientific indicator of present and future events, especially those involving kings. Even the Jews, who regarded Gentile forms of predictive astrology as blasphemy, believed that God placed the stars in the sky as signs. Searching the heavens for signs is the stock in trade of the astrologer, and indeed, astrologers are central figures in this drama. Remember those wise men?

The Greek word for "wise men" is “magoi” which is derived from the Persian word for “priest” or “bearers of the gift”. By the time of Jesus, Magi held priestly occupations in numerous religious traditions over a wide geographical area and the word “magi” had also come to mean “occultist”. The Magi were the gold standard of astrologers and their influence was known all over the ancient world. Their origins, which are not entirely clear, have been traced back to Ephraim, heir to Joseph, who was made their chief in Egypt. Assyria captured them from Israel; Babylon took them from Assyria in 612 B.C., as did the Persians when they conquered Babylon. Over the centuries they became important members of royal courts, often serving as emissaries to kings. Persian sects espoused the Zoroastrian religion. However, contrary to popular belief, there is no record in Zoroastrian literature that Persian Magi visited Christ. Historian David Livingstone believes them to have been a renegade sect called Magusseans based in Asia Minor, who spoke Aramaic. The idea that they were kings, and the names ascribed to them, were a

Medieval European invention. No one knows how many Magi journeyed to Bethlehem, but they would have been traveling with a royal entourage, on horseback, not on camels.

Birth of the Messiah

What brought the Magi to Judaea? A prophesy made by Daniel in the sixth century BC, which predicted the birth of a Messiah. Daniel was enslaved during the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. He became a Magi, highly prized by King Nebuchadnezzar because of his ability to interpret dreams and predict historical events. The Magi were aware of Daniel's prophecies, since he was one of them. However, Daniel's prophesy is vague about the time when the Messiah would appear. Flavius Josephus mentions that most Jews were certain that it would occur sometime in the first century.

The Hebrew/Aramaic term "Messiah" simply means "a person that will become rightful king of the Jews". A much later Greek translation added the meaning "the bringer of salvation through redemption of sin". The Magi were looking for a temporal ruler, not a savior. Nevertheless, the boundaries between royalty and divinity were decidedly fuzzy. All kings claimed divine roots and politics and religion were entangled, so tracking the destinies of monarchs in the stars was simply business as usual for that era.

What star led the wise men to Bethlehem? Or—was it a planet? In antiquity the sole distinction between stars and planets was that the former were fixed in position and the latter moved. The Greek word "planet" means "wandering star". Based on descriptions of the star's behavior, "it went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was", so we can conclude the Magi were following a planet. But which one?

Signs in the Skies

Beginning in 7 BC a string of astronomical occurrences which lend themselves to interpretations concerning royal birth began to appear. A rare triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in the constellation Pisces in May, September, and December. Both planets have kingly pretensions; Jupiter was known as the "planet of Kings" and Saturn as the "Protector of the Jews". Additionally, a rare stellium (grouping) in Pisces, of five of the seven known celestials opposed Mars in Virgo in March of that year. In February of 6 BC a massing of Jupiter, Mars and Saturn occurred, again in the constellation Pisces. All of these rare events could easily have been interpreted as signs that the Jewish Messiah had been, or was about to be, born.

An 18 month period during 3-2 BC. was most remarkable in terms of celestial events. On May 19, 3 BC, Saturn and Mercury were in close conjunction (joined). Then Saturn moved eastward to meet with Venus on June 12th. On August 12th, Jupiter and Venus conjoined, appearing as a very bright morning star. On June 17th 2BC, they joined again, this time in the constellation Leo, appearing as one very bright evening star. On August 27th, a conjunction of Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury also occurred in Leo. Leo the Lion was referred to as the "Lion of Judah", after the tribe of Judah from which the Messiah was prophesied to emerge. It was also considered the "head" or "chief" sign of the Zodiac and the "Royal Constellation", ruled by the sun and dominated by Regulus, the "King Star".

Most significantly, August 12th 3 BC saw the first of three sequential conjunctions of the King Planet Jupiter with the King Star Regulus. Because of retrograde motion (back and forth) the two were to meet again in February and May of 2 BC. To astrologers, the circling of Jupiter about Regulus would have sent a clear signal that a great king or ruler was being introduced, to the world. Romans interpreted this to confer celestial blessings on the ceremonies honoring the Emperor. The Magi had another idea.

The first Jupiter/Venus conjunction of August 12th 3 BC alerted these astrologers to look for signs. The triple conjunction of Jupiter and Regulus lent confirmation. The second conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, in Leo, on June 17th 2 BC, started them on their way west. The “star” they followed was the planet Jupiter, which, having gone through its retrograde motion, stationed direct (appeared to stand still) on December 25th 2 BC in the southern sky directly over Bethlehem. It remained stationary for 6 days, in the center, or perhaps symbolically in the “womb”, of the constellation Virgo. This scenario, first presented by Dr. Ernest Martin, in his book, “The Star of Bethlehem: The Star That Astonished the World” is the one that best fits the facts at our disposal.

Avatar of a New Age

Jesus was not born on December 25th. He was already a toddler when the Magi arrived. The celebration of his birth was moved to December 25th by Pope Constantine in the 4th Century AD, to coincide with the birthday of Sol Invictus, the Roman Sun God. So when was Christ born? We know from Biblical references that Jesus was born six months after his cousin John the Baptist. Theologians surmise that Elizabeth gave birth to John sometime in March. This means Jesus’ birth would have taken place the following September. The year was 3 BC.

We may never be able to construct a horoscope for Jesus. In essence, his birth is synonymous with the birthing of the then New Age of Pisces. The stars proclaimed both new births. Many of the aforementioned celestial events, particularly the Pisces stellium opposing Mars, ruler of the outgoing Age of Aries, can be interpreted as heralding the beginning of the Piscean era. Jesus is the acknowledged avatar (spiritual teacher) of that Age.

Stars of Wonder

The signs in the sky were indicators of a paradigm shift, much as we are today transitioning into the New Age of Aquarius. On Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 2006 the King Planet Jupiter moved into its home sign of Sagittarius. From December 8-10th and again on December 17-19th a rare stellium of six planets including Jupiter and Pluto, formed in the sign of the archer. Sagittarius rules religion and philosophy. Were the stars harbingers of a new spiritual renaissance on the horizon? As we move cautiously forward into a future of uncertain potential, we can only wonder.

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