

The Wise Men and the Star

See "The Magi — How Did They Know?"

By Gary L. Durham

<https://pcnh.church/blog/2021/12/17/the-magi-how-did-they-know>

(Some of this is from a reprint an article in The Counsellor magazine, December 1990, and The Preacher's Magazine, and updated with expanded information in 2013).

The best examination of all this is the book, "The Star of Bethlehem" by David Hughes, 1979

Alternate theories are discussed in the book, "The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi" by Michael R. Molnar

Jesus' Presentation at the Temple (40 days after His birth); two witnesses - Simeon and Anna: **Luke 2:21-38**

He says "this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;"

"set" - Simeon's prophetic utterance stems from **Isaiah 8:14** - "And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken."

Simeon is described as "waiting for the consolation of Israel." The "comforter" or "consoler" was one of the names of the Messiah, and points to the "seven of consolation," passages read leading up to Rosh Hashanah when we assume Jesus was born.

The visit of the Magi is described in **Matthew 2:1-23**.

From some clues in the text, we assume their visit may have occurred up to two years after Jesus' birth. Early church fathers Origen and Eusebius say that Jesus was two years old when the Magi visited.

Some assumptions we have are wrong. They weren't "three kings." This idea probably came from prophecies like these:

- **Psalms 72:10-11** - "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him."

- **Isaiah 60:3** - "And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."

- **Psalms 68:29** - "Because of thy temple at Jerusalem shall kings bring presents unto

thee."

And there weren't even three Magi. Scripture doesn't number them. The number three probably reflects the different gifts they brought - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But who were they, and why did they link a star with the birth of a Jewish king?

Studying the visit of the Magi uncovers the meaning of a wide spectrum of Messianic prophecies.

Stars as Signs in the Heavens

God said that one function of the "lights" in the heavens was for "signs."

- **Genesis 1:14** - "And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years"

He later gives more detail of what these signify:

- **Psalms 19:1** - "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge."

- **Psalms 50:5-6** - "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. And the heavens proclaim His righteousness, for God Himself is Judge."

What we call astrology - looking for your personal destiny by interpreting the positions of the planets and constellations - originally was something very different.

According to Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, Seth, the son of Adam, invented "that peculiar sort of wisdom which is concerned with the heavenly bodies and their order" ("Antiquities," Book I, Chapter 2, Paragraph 3).

But the book of Yasher (Jasher) records the very night of Abram's birth in Nimrod's kingdom:

Yasher 8:1 "And it was in the night of Abram's birth, that all the servants of Terah, and all the wise men of Nimrod, and his conjurors came and ate and drank in the house of Terah, and they rejoiced with him on that night. And when all the wise men and conjurors went out from the house of Terah, they lifted up their eyes toward heaven that night to look at the stars, and they saw, and behold one very large star came from the east and ran in the heavens, and he swallowed up the four stars from the four sides of the heavens. And all the wise men of the king and his conjurors were astonished at the sight, and the sages understood this matter, and they knew its import. And they said to

each other, "This only betokens the child that has been born to Terah this night, who will grow up and be fruitful, and multiply, and possess all the earth, he and his children for ever, and he and his seed will slay great kings, and inherit their lands."

In the legends of the Jewish patriarchs and prophets, it is stated that a brilliant star shone at the time of the birth of Moses. It was seen by the Magi of Egypt, who immediately informed the king. As Rashi tells it, "On the day Moses was born, his astrologers told him [Pharaoh], 'Today the one who will save them has been born.'"

The Degradation of the Story

Anthropologists have found that behind every pagan pantheon of deities, there is what they call *Urmonotheismus* or *deus otiosus*, a primordial "high god." Myths often describe some misdeed or sin by humans which angered God and made him retreat into heaven. Although they can't interact with him, they sometimes entreat him during times of dire distress. But mostly he is forgotten or ignored.

See "The Origins of the World's Mythologies" by E. S. Michael Witzel

- "In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism" by Wnfried Carduan

- "Eternity in their Hearts: The Untold Story of Christianity Among Folk Religions of Ancient People" by Don Richardson

A vaguely remembered relationship with the one God has been passed on by Adam's descendants, but degraded and reshaped into many forms through history.

One key story that these myths tell in one form or another is a permutation of **Genesis 3:15** - that a Deliverer, Messiah or hero figure will be born of a woman, defeat a serpent or a dragon, give up his life in that attempt, but somehow overcome death in the end and bring in a new golden age or heavenly kingdom.

We see versions of this in mythology - - mother and child figures like Isis and Osiris, resurrecting gods like Adonis, even gods hung on trees, like Odin.

Using the stars, constellations and planets as sort of hieroglyphs, the images we know as the signs of the zodiac - from Virgo to Leo - were used to describe this story, which some call the Gospel in the Stars.

One rabbinical tradition says Abraham went down to Egypt and he rebuked the Egyptians for their corruptions of the meaning of the constellations and tried to teach the Egyptian priests the original divine meaning given to the Antediluvian patriarchs.

Jews were reluctant to indulge in astrology, but were familiar with the stars, constellations and planets in the heavens:

- **Job 38:31-32** - "Can you bind the cluster of the Pleiades [or, the Seven Stars], or loose the belt of Orion? Can you bring out Mazzaroth [the Zodiac, or Constellations] in

its season? Or can you guide the Great Bear [or, Arcturus] with its cubs?"

The Caste of the Magi

At the time of the prophet Daniel, when Israel was sent into exile in Babylon, there was a class or caste of men called wise men. They included, "...magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers..." (**Daniel 2:2**). It is clear from **Daniel 2, verses 12 and 13**, that Daniel and his friends (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), were considered part of this caste of men known as the Wise Men of Babylon who were to be advisors to the King on a great breadth of subjects, including religion, science, philosophy and politics. They were from a mixture of various religions and disciplines throughout the empire.

About 30 years into the exile, the Medes who controlled a large empire east of Babylon, were conquered by the Persian king Cyrus the Great. Then about 20 years after that, Cyrus conquered Babylon, where the Jews were still in exile. Cyrus absorbed the Medes along with their culture, and the religion of Zoroastrianism.

There was a priestly caste among the Medes known as the Magi. Zoroastrianism had striking similarities to Judaism. In the writings of their holy book, the Zend Avesta, they were expecting a Messiah-like figure, a "man of peace" who would be born of a virgin. At the time of his birth a star would shine at noonday. He would battle the forces of evil, resurrect the dead, conduct a last judgment, end time and bring in everlasting righteousness.

Daniel and his companions were numbered among the wise men of Babylon, and according to **Daniel 6**, Daniel was appointed the leader of all the Magi under Darius. No doubt he introduced other of his Jewish brethren into the caste, and passed on elements of the Torah and biblical prophecies of the coming Messiah to rest. This could have been passed down and studied by the Magi of Jesus' day.

A Jewish tradition even claims that Daniel founded an order of Magi and instructed them to watch for the Messiah through the generations.

It was not unusual for Magi to travel abroad from their home in the east (probably Parthia in the time of Jesus).

Some Magi were recorded as accompanying the king of Parthia when he visited Emperor Nero in 66 A.D. The report even says they returned by a different route, just as reported about the Magi who visited Jesus.

- See Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 13 and in Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXIII, 1-7. The explicit mention that the king brought Magi with him and that they captured the imaginations of Nero and the people is found in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, XXX.

Plato says that Magi showed up at the birth of Socrates, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The god Mithras, the Persian savior, received the same visit and gifts from the Magi according to legend.

In Chinese and Indian myth, a bright star is related to the birth of some gods and heroes.

The exact nature of the "star" in the Matthew story, and the date of its appearing has been much debated and is too complicated to get into here. There are good arguments for a comet, or a supernova, or simply a conjunction of planets in a particular constellation that signified a royal birth.

Unlike the early Babylonians, the Magi at the time of the Roman Empire used mathematical calculations to determine eclipses, conjunctions of planets and their relationship to the constellations. So if it was a conjunction of planets they could have anticipated, "seeing" it rising in the east and calculating when it would be "over" the place of Jesus birth - which perhaps could be seen reflected in a well or pond from directly overhead.

Daniel himself recorded the timeline of when Messiah was expected - 69 weeks of years from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Daniel 9:24-27) - and the people of Judea were expecting Him.

Daniel states that the Messiah would be "cut off." The Hebrew word translated as "cut off" is "karath." This word literally means to punish with death by piercings.

Other scriptures foreshadowed a star tied to the Messiah, especially Balaam's prophecy:

- **Numbers 24:17** - "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth."

From "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah" by Alfred Edersheim
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edersheim/lifetimes.vii.viii.html>

There are several references to a star liked to the Messiah in post-rabbinical apocalypses. These could be based on earlier teachings.

The so-called Messiah-Haggadah (Aggadat ha-Mashiah), in an exegesis of **Numbers 24:17-19**, mentions a "Star of the Messiah" which would appear and "shine from the East for fifteen days, and if it be prolonged, it will be for the good of Israel."

A similar statement occurs at the close of a collection of three Midrashim - respectively entitled, 'The Book of Elijah,' 'Chapters about the Messiah,' and 'The Mysteries of R. Simon, the son of Jochai' (and a variant called The Prayer of R. Shim'on b. Yoḥai) - where we read that a Star in the East was to appear two years before the birth of the Messiah.

Alfred Edersheim notes that there three conjunctions of the planets Jupiter and Saturn

in the constellation Pisces (which occurs only once every 800 years) two years before the birth of Jesus.

Messianic Expectations

Throughout the Roman world, there was a vague expectation that something new was coming, a hope for peace and a return to a Golden Era.

These hopes stemmed in great part from influences from these Jewish expectations of a Messiah. Besides the teachings passed down by Daniel through the Magi in eastern lands like Parthia and Babylon, another stream of this hope flowed from the highly respected oracles called the Sibyls - prophetic utterances by women at pagan oracle sites like Delphi and Pythia and elsewhere. Their earliest sayings were recorded in The Sibylline Books that were considered sacred to the Romans.

One prophecy by the Cumaean Sibyl was popularized by the Roman poet Virgil, the author of The Aeneid.

Virgil published a collection of poems around 40 B.C. that expressed a prophecy supposedly given by the Cumaean Sibyl.

<https://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilEclogues.html>

"Now is come the last age of the Cumaean prophecy: The great cycle of periods is born anew. Now returns the Maid, returns the reign of Saturn: Now from high heaven a new generation comes down. Yet do thou at that boy's birth, In whom the iron race shall begin to cease, And the golden to arise over all the world, Holy Lucina, be gracious; now thine own Apollo reigns." - Eclogue 4 (ll. 4–11)

Line 22 mentions that "the cattle will not fear huge lions", and has been compared to both Isaiah 11:6 from the Hebrew Bible, which states that, "The calf and the young lion will grow up together and a little child will lead them", as well as a passage from the Sibylline Oracles 3.791-3, which reads: "The lion, devourer of flesh, will eat husks in the stall like an ox, and tiny children will lead them in chains."

"The serpent, too, will perish, and perish will the plant that hides its poison." Later Christians saw in the reference to the serpent a reference to Satan's defeat, the child as Christ and the Maid as the virgin Mary.

Meanwhile, there was growing skepticism within the city elites regarding the credibility of its traditional religion. Also, the emperors began deifying themselves, and as the empire grew, new cults and mystery religions were constantly being absorbed. Philosophies like the atheistic Epicureanism claimed a growing following. At the same time, more and more Romans were attracted by the moral teachings of the Jews in living their midst.

According to Plutarch in De defectu oraculorum, "The Obsolescence of Oracles", during

the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37) an Egyptian sailor named Thamus was sailing to Italy by way of the Greek island of Paxi. As he passed by the Greek islands, he heard a divine voice call to him from across the water.

The voice addressed Thamus by name and told him, "The great god Pan is dead!" The sailor announced this news when he reached port and the story of Pan's death quickly spread.

This widely discussed story was interpreted by Christians to signal the end of all ("pan") pagan spirits and gods.

Jewish expectation of Messiah was extremely high just around the time of Jesus' birth.

Why?

https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/eastman_mark/messiah/sfm_06.cfm

- **Genesis 49:10** - "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the people."

Targum Onkelos - "The transmission of dominion shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor the scribe from his children's children, forever, until Messiah comes."

Israel maintained their own judges and lawgivers through the exile and even up to Roman times.

According to Josephus (Antiquities 17:13) around the year 6-7 A.D., the son and successor to King Herod, a man named Herod Archelaus, was dethroned and banished to Gaul. He was replaced, not by a Jewish king, but by a Roman procurator named Caponius. The legal power of the Sanhedrin was immediately restricted and its power to adjudicate capital cases was immediately removed.

Talmud - "A little more than forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the power of pronouncing capital sentences was taken away from the Jews." (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin, folio 24.)

"When the members of the Sanhedrin found themselves deprived of their right over life and death, a general consternation took possession of them: they covered their heads with ashes, and their bodies with sackcloth, exclaiming: 'Woe unto us for the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come'" (Babylonian Talmud, Chapter 4, folio 37.)

But He *had* come!

And the visit of the Magi represented the whole Gentile world acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and king.

Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are symbolic of Jesus future ministry.

Gold reflects royalty and His kingship. Frankincense represents worship and His being worshipped as God. And myrrh was used to anoint the dead, representing His humanity and death on the cross for sin.

Or as Origen say in Contra Celsum: "gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to a God."

The story shows that we come to Christ by many different pathways. But the path always results in repentance and humility.

Elizabeth heard of Jesus through her family - her cousin Mary.

Shepherds heard of Jesus by the announcement of an angel

Simeon was brought to Jesus by the Holy Spirit directing him to the Temple.

Anna came upon Jesus by happenstance.

The wise men came to Jesus through reasoning after seeing the signs and considering the evidence.