

Epiphany

Matt 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ ““But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Sermon: *Room For Only One King*

I always think that Christmas is over too quickly; trees get thrown out for collection, the outside lights that decorate our homes come down, and the winter school term starts all too promptly. We have the long build up to Christmas in Advent, and then it is all over, and life goes on as before. However, not everything happens on Christmas day. The wise men arrived later – perhaps up to 2 years later! In the Christian calendar, Epiphany begins the 12th day after Christmas, which is January 6th. That’s when we celebrate the visit of the magi, God’s revealing of himself to gentiles (or non-Jews). So today, let’s reflect on the wise men in the Christmas story, before our busy lives pick up the pace of a New Year.

In the Greco-Roman world, a great leader would have a dramatic birth story with signs to testify and draw attention to the significance of the one who was born. Some scholars therefore see Matthew’s birth narrative as a stylized story, rather than *literal* history, yet one with a profound theological meaning. Consequently, what the author is doing is building on Old Testament prophecy and images, and makes parallels with Jesus to point out *his* significance to a *Jewish* audience. For example, Jesus is likened to a new “Israel,” who also goes to Egypt and returns, and as one who is tested in the wilderness, but – unlike the people of Moses’ day – Jesus is continually faithful to God. There are other parallels with Moses and Jesus in Matthew too; just as Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, so Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount that explained and revised the Mosaic Law. In light of that, Matthew’s birth story might have been alluding to another incident in Moses’ day, concerning the seer Balaam in Num 22-24. The non-Jew Balaam, a magus who also came from the East, prophesies “an oracle of the man whose eye sees clearly; the oracle of one who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty. . . . I see him (says Balaam), but not now; I behold him, but not near— *a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter (or a king) shall rise out of Israel* . . . (Num 24:15-17). When the book of Numbers was written, the prophecy probably referred to the future King David, but in 1st century Palestine, this was commonly understood as a messianic reference. Furthermore, in Isaiah 60:1-6, we read:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you . . . the wealth of the nations shall come to you. . . . *They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

This “end times” prophecy is one of many that speaks of the gathering of those of other nations to come and worship God. With the visit of the magi, Matthew is informing his discerning audience that those days have now come with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, the rightful King of the Jews. This new king is in vivid contrast to the evil Herod who everyone knew wasn’t even a pure-blooded Jew, and was only a usurper appointed king by the conquering Romans.

If Matthew's birth story is *literary* with a profound theological message, then it is an ingenious story! But it is not impossible that "star" was a real astronomical phenomenon, and hence the visit of the wise men may also be based on kernel of *historical* truth. As a physicist, I find that possibility fascinating! So let us keep an open mind.

What do we know about the "wise men" in Mathew's account? They came from the East and they saw a "star," which signified *to them* the birth of the king of the Jews. These men, who incidentally were *not* kings, are generally regarded to be astrologers or religious priests from Persia. They may well have been Zoroastrians who shared some beliefs with Jewish Pharisees, such as in a supreme deity, a final saviour who would come to rule in righteousness, and in an afterlife. We should not regard them as those who write horoscopes in daily newspapers – rather they are the academics and royal advisors of their day. The astrologers' observations of the movements in the sky were seen as providing omens, warnings, and signs to the kings or rulers. It would therefore be quite natural that these wise men would first approach King Herod.

What are we to make of the "star" itself? Various suggestions and opinions have been put forward, but no definitive explanation exists. The Greek word for "star" (*aster*) may not uniquely correspond to a literal "star" but to another heavenly event in the night sky. Moreover, Matthew – not being an expert – may not have used the correct technical term. One idea is that a supernova occurred – a star literally exploded. Such unpredictable events occur from time to time; a nova was observed in 1054, 1572, 1604 and in 1987. Chinese records suggest one such nova – or possibly a comet – occurred in 5BC – lasting, or being bright, for about 70 days. It is, however, doubtful that a nova is the right explanation as there are no signs of supernova remnants today – and novas do not move in the night sky in the way Matthew describes. If Matthew's star was a comet, which is not impossible, they may well have been interpreted as a political disturbance or regime change – in other words, as a *bad* omen! If so, when the wise men informed Herod the comet was a birth sign the King of the Jews, then no wonder he was a troubled man! Now Halley's comet occurred in 12 BC, too early to be the "star" of Bethlehem. However, its appearance prompted one Roman historian (Dio Cassius) to link it with the death of Markus Agrippa and wrote: "the star called comet *stood for several days over the city* [of Rome]." Furthermore, Halley's Comet re-appeared in AD 64, in living memory of Matthew's readers.

However, in 7BC there was a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, all three meetings of these 2 planets occurred in the constellation Pisces, which - when taken together – could symbolise a royal event for the Jewish nation. In 6BC Jupiter, Mars and Saturn also came close to each other in the same constellation. This particular triple grouping of the planets does not happen for about 800 years. In none of these "conjunctions" would the planets be close enough to overlap or be seen as single bright "star." However, the symbolic meaning of the planets and the constellations of these conjunctions could be interpreted as a special event for the nation of Israel – for those are so inclined. These relatively rare conjunctions may well have been interpreted by these astrologers as an occasion of tremendous significance and worthy of going to great lengths in order to honour this king. Moreover, as planets move around the sun, the motion from our earth-bound perspective is complicated. They appear to wander through the distant constellations, then stop, move backwards,

stop, and then move forwards again. This “retrograde loop,” to use the technical term, is not unusual in itself and can loosely explain the “star” appearing to move in the night sky.

Although we cannot come to a firm conclusion over the Star of Bethlehem, this and other similar matters should not be stumbling block to faith. While there is intelligent, rational supporting evidence for this event, we should not look for definitive proof, as that will always be elusive. We walk by faith, not by sight – as Paul says in 2 Cor 5:7.

Let us leave the star issue and return to the Matthew’s story of the wise men. These men were gentiles seeking to honour the child born to be king of the Jews. How disappointed they must have been to arrive at the palace and to find that there was no royal birth. Had they misinterpreted the heavenly signs? They had risked much and were now facing what was, for them, intellectual failure. Had they journeyed all this way for nothing?

Yet King Herod the Great did not dismiss them as mere “foreigners with strange ideas.” He and his court were deeply troubled and accepted the wise men’s interpretation of the heavenly sign as valid. Herod wondered if star might be a sign of the long-awaited Messiah and sought advice from the “people’s chief priests and teachers of the law.” They interpreted Micah’s prophecy as saying the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, implying a king in the line of David. Notice that although they seem to know their scripture, they do not act on it – their curiosity is not sufficiently aroused. Herod, with ulterior motives, then sends the wise men on their way to find the child.

Again, what were the wise men’s thoughts at this time? Were they still hopeful of finding their goal? Or did they think King Herod was discretely getting rid of them - just sending them off on a wild goose chase? Their intellect and wisdom had inspired them to undertake an arduous pilgrimage to honour a special king. Yet, bizarrely in their minds, the Jews themselves were ignorant of the significance of signs in the night sky! This is Matthew’s miniature of Jesus’ life and ministry – and is also reflected in the other gospels. John writes: *“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him”* (John 1:10-11).

But, thankfully, as the wise men left Jerusalem they were reassured by seeing the star again and were “overwhelmed with joy.” They came to Bethlehem, knelt down and worshipped the child Jesus. These non-Jews could finally honour the true “King of the Jews” with gifts that are fit for a king. However, the circumstances were not ones they envisaged. The king of the Jews was not to be found in a prestigious palace in the main city, but a humble home in a small town. In their journey, these learned men had their preconceived ideas changed. God does that! God ultimately fulfils their hearts desire, but surprises them along the way – and sends them onward along a different route. Expect surprises from God – he will not fit in with our expectations, but will continue to stretch our faith, imagination, and our intellect.

Again, the wise men's search to the Christ-child was based solely on human wisdom and that led them to Jerusalem. It took the Jewish scriptures to pin-point the location as Bethlehem. The same is true today. As we saw with possible physical explanations for the star, trying to understand the mind of God through human reason, with natural theology and philosophical arguments, can certainly point us in the right direction, but can only lead us so far. Ultimately, we need to turn to the Scripture to encounter both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. We need God's Spirit to reveal Godself to us.

Mathew, then, sees the wise men as instrumental in fulfilling ancient prophecies concerning Jesus. These non-Jewish men of wisdom recognise the birth of a great King, when the so-called "wise men" of the King Herod's own court can't see what is going on. Indeed, we read a little later in Matthew that Herod's fear and paranoia resulted in the tragic slaughter of the innocents. This again mirrors the Egyptian Pharaoh who wanted all baby boys killed – yet Moses was saved.

Evidently, there is room for only one king. Which king will we serve? In Matthew's day the choice was between Jesus and Herod, who was there with the blessing of the Roman emperor. But the point is still valid for us today. There is still room for only one king. Which king will we serve? Jesus, or the rulers of this age? Like Money? Power? Pleasure? Total freedom to do what we want? Or will we kneel and worship in front of the rightful king – Jesus? Jesus, the promised Messiah who came into the world to address every injustice and who started God's work of putting all things right.

There is room for only one king; make your choice afresh this New Year. May it be that of Moses' successor, Joshua, who proclaimed: "as for me and my household, we shall serve the Lord" (Josh 24:15). Amen.