

The Sky-Watchers

They were astronomers as well as astrologers, and they did leave a record of their observations in the basement storerooms of Sippar in Babylonia.

Sunrise always seems so majestic and deliberate, but daybreak races across the face of the world at 1,040 miles per hour lighting the mountain tips, sliding down into the valleys, sweeping away the stars. This is how it happened on a certain morning during the reign of Caesar Augustus that daybreak came to the watches on the Tower of Sippar at least forty minutes before it came to the hills of Judea.

The Observatory

In the “*Land of the Two Rivers*” about 45 miles north of Babylon at the point where the Euphrates and Tigris come closest together (now in Iraq) there was an old, old University Town called Sippar. For at least 1,200 years, possibly 1,500 years before Christ, there had been an astronomical observatory there. For all that time a daily record had been kept of the movements of the sun and moon and particularly of the Wanderers, the planets that can be seen to move against the background of the “*fixed stars*.” Every night a group of men kept careful watch and they knew much. They knew, for instance, that the planet Venus has phases like the moon and waxes and wanes. Only the best eyes in the rarest kind of conditions can barely detect this. They also knew (and this is even more puzzling) that Saturn has rings.

Their official picture of Saturn shows a god standing in a tilted ring like a tire around his waist)
 -- [“*Unveiling the Universe*” by Norton Wagner, Research Publishers, 154 Nassau St. New York, N.Y.]

Modern astronomers have always assumed that the rings could not be seen with the unaided eye because modern astronomy did not dream of such an arrangement until telescopes were invented. These men of Sippar were the equivalent of our modern astrophysicists and were held in similar esteem by their contemporaries.

Daniel's Contribution

In the fifth century B.C. Daniel, the captive administrator from Judea was the head of the school of astronomy and three other colleges (Daniel 2:48). Some of the information that these men of Sippar accumulated may have been from Daniel or even from a prophecy written in the Book of Numbers with which Daniel was surely familiar -- that stated, “*There shall come a Star out of Jacob...*” (Numbers 24:17)

When sputnik was first rocketed into orbit in October of 1957, sleepy people who climbed out of bed to see it learned the first rule of astronomy. -- In order to find something among the stars you have to know *what* you are looking for, and *when* and *where* to watch. This is true of the Christmas star. We must know what object we are looking for, and what year it shone, and where.

Forgive me for getting a little technical here, but it is necessary at this point. I am quoting various authenticated information that is necessary in understanding this concept.

Something Strange

The “*star of Bethlehem*” is said to be a rare conjunction of stars appearing on the horizon. The Franklin Institute Planetarium in its annual Christmas show correlates the religious account of the star with a scientific explanation. More than 50,000 persons annually crowd into the domed chamber during the holiday season to hear and see the story of the Nativity and of the mysterious star that led the Wise Men to Bethlehem. They tell us that a “*star*” was a rare conjunction or close passing of the planets Jupiter and Saturn.

Careful study of ancient records reveals that the date of an extremely rare conjunction of planets, coincide with this date of world-wide taxes under Caesar Augustus mentioned in Luke 2:1

Astronomers, using sophisticated instruments and state-of-the-art planetariums, can reconstruct the appearance of the sky on any given night in history – including that night two thousands years ago – and they propose theories to explain the Star of Bethlehem scientifically. These astronomers use technology, mathematics and the laws of astrophysics to figure out what might have occurred that night.

Their theory is that the star that appeared over Bethlehem was Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system and the second brightest after Venus.

These planets move through the sky relative to “*fixed stars*” (The word “*planet*” comes from the Greek word for “*wanderer*”). Planets, like the Earth, orbit the Sun. Looking from the Earth, they change their positions from night to night, generally moving eastward through a series of constellations. However, the planets do not always move eastward. At times they appear to reverse their course, moving westward for two or three months before turning back and heading eastward again. This is called “*retrograde motion*.” This happens because the planets farther from the Sun than we are – from Mars to Pluto – take longer to complete one orbit. Thus, Jupiter moves eastward until a time comes when the faster-orbiting Earth overtakes it; then it suddenly seems to be moving west (in retrograde). The effect is the same as when you’re in a car that overtakes a slower car. As you begin to pass it, the other car appears to slow down, at the moment of passing -- it appears to move backward. These planetary “*dances*” have been going on from the time the solar system was formed and were occurring when the Wise Men looked at the stars and saw a wondrous event that has not happened since.

Ancient astronomers were gathered on “*Ziggural*,” -- [a temple in the form of a pyramidal tower presenting the appearance of a series of terraces]. -- On our present calendar, May, 7 B.C., Jupiter and Saturn, the two largest planets (called, “*the Wanderers*”) had come within one degree of each other just before daybreak in the Eastern sky. On October 5th that same year the two planets came together again, this time at midnight directly overhead. And now, for the third time on December 1st, they were once more in conjunction, this time southwestward in the sunset sky. This triple conjunction only occurs once in 805 years and this time it had some added features that were highly significant to the astronomer-astrologers. The conjunction was occurring in the Zodiacal sign of Pisces (constellation of the Mediterranean lands). Jupiter indicated that the formation concerned a king -- a very great king! Saturn was the protecting star of Israel. It could mean only one thing: a Great King had been born to the people of Israel in Palestine on the Mediterranean coast.

I realize that the Zodiac is a tool Satan and the powers of darkness use in this day and age to deceive -- with its horoscope (or, horror-scope), however, there was a time, before God's Word was given, that God spoke through the stars. See the study on "Signs in the Heavens."

The Wise Men, spoken of in Matthew 2:1-11, saw in the motions of the stars and planets a connection with their interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. These Wise Men (or "Magi") were respected Persian priestly cast – whose practices included observing the motions of the stars and interpreting their meaning, a combination of both their knowledge of science technology and understanding of Scripture.

Their question to Herod was where could they see the newly born King of the Jews, predicted throughout the Old Testament and heralded, they said, by "His star in the east."

Sky observers of that time would have paid attention when, on September 3 B.C. -- (modern planetarium programs tell us) – Jupiter appeared to pass very close to Saturn, the two largest planets -- and the star, "Regulus" -- "The King's star." When these two planets appear to get close together it is called a "conjunction."

In the ensuing months, Jupiter headed eastward, stopped and reversed direction. On February 17, 2 B.C. the planet passed even closer to Regulus. Continuing its dance, Jupiter passed Regulus a third time on May 8. Thus, over nearly eight months, the Magi saw Jupiter appear to draw a circle or crown above the King's star, beginning in the east.

Jupiter also formed a dramatic alignment with Venus, a celestial event almost unheard of in the history of astronomy. The sequence, that took place on the evening of June 17, 2 B.C. Jupiter and Venus drew closer and closer until, at 8:51 that night, the two planets appeared virtually to kiss each other, fusing into a single brilliant star in the western sky.

It was a custom, as it is today, that when there is an unusual configuration in the sky, astronomers arrange an expedition to go and observe. This they did!

It took many centuries of archeology, history, and astronomy to put the pieces together and know what the Wise Men had seen. Through the centuries from the Birth of Christ until about the beginning of the 20th century most of the Bible expositors wrote of the Star of Bethlehem as though it were a mystery. Some of them, because of a faulty translation assumed that it must have been "a special fiery ball traveling through the sky just above their heads," and not a star at all. Could it be some kind of Unidentified Flying Object?. Why wasn't the mystery understood earlier?

1. Only Matthew's Gospel mentions it
 - meaning that there was no cross reference for more information
2. A translation obscured the facts about it
3. The astronomers were all considering the *wrong year* in their looking for past astronomical events that would account for the phenomenon.

Kapier The Royal Astronomer

The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place in the year 1603, Johannes Kepler, Royal Mathematician and Astronomer of the Court of Prague, was sitting up to observe a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Pisces. It was to be visible in late December of that year and into January of 1604. Possibly because it was so near to Christmas, it suddenly occurred to Kepler that perhaps such a conjunction had been the Star of Bethlehem. His charts showed that this particular conjunction happened every 805 years. Twice 805 is 1610 years, and this subtracted from 1604 would be back to 6 B.C. He also remembered that the great Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Abarbanel (1437-1508) had written that the expected Messiah would be born when this exact conjunction occurred in the sign of Pisces. Kepler made a note of this in his books but did nothing further to pursue the matter, possibly because he assumed that it was six years too early.

Modern Archeology is Born

In the 19th century when Napoleon discovered the wonders of ancient Egypt, modern archeology was born. The past began to be dug up and deciphered. Until then most of the recent civilizations regarded the monuments of the past simply as handy quarries for good cut stone. All of the marble facings on the great pyramids had been removed to use on later palaces for the caliphs. The bricks from Babylon built a dam at Mosul.

Before and after World War I both German and English teams of archeologists began a systematic exploration of the Middle East. There, north of Babylon, they found Sippar and its vast store of cuneiform tablets describing day by day for centuries the motions of the stars. Literally tons of these were shipped to Germany in hardwood crates. There a professor, Herr Schnabel, one of the few men in the world that could read cuneiform, began the laborious work of deciphering. One day in 1926 he came across the record of the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn converging and separating four times in 7 and 6 B.C. He remembered Johannes Kepler's notation. By now it was known that Dionysus Exiguus had erred by about six years. It all came together; it all came together at last.

We know from Scripture that these were "WISE" men from the East. They were wise in science, and astronomy, but, in addition, to this wisdom, they also were wise in their knowledge of the Scriptures. They recognized a star that they had not seen before in the heavens.

They said to Herald, "We have seen His star in the east." Whose star was that? There can only be one answer to this question, and it is found in Numbers 24:17:

"I shall see Him, but not now: I shall behold Him, but not high: there shall come star out of Jacob, and a Sepetre shall rise out of Israel."

This Scripture undoubtedly was familiar to these Wise Men who were, not only students of astronomy, but also students of the Word of God. When this particular Star appeared they immediately recognized it as the Star of Jacob, which had to do with the coming of the King of the Jews. They realized that He must have been born in Judea and knew from Scripture that Jerusalem was the capital of Palestine, the home of the Jews, the Nation out of which the Star of Jacob had to come. They set out for Jerusalem.

There is nothing in the record to indicate that the star *led* the Wise Men and went before them all the way from the East, probably over a thousand miles. Nothing in Scripture indicates that the star actually went before them. What is stated is that “*they saw the star in the East,*” knew what it meant and set out to Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1-2).

They said, “We **HAVE SEEN** (past tense) *His star in the East.*” They did not say that they had seen it since. After interviewing King Herald, they needed the help of the star to find the *exact* house where Jesus lived. The “*star of the East*” merely revealed the birth of the King of the Jews, and, knew He would be found in the land of Palestine. After they leave Jerusalem, God guided them to the very house:

“When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the East, went before them, till it come and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (Matthew 2:9-10).

They were happy to see the star because it was the same star they had seen a long time ago in the East. They did not need the star to lead them to Jerusalem, as everyone knew the road. However, a conjunction of stars would not be enough now, they needed something, or someone, to guide them to the *exact* house.

Notice, in passing, that Jesus is not “*an infant*” when the Wise Men arrived, but was “*a young child.*” The Greek word for “*babe*” in Luke, when the shepherds found Jesus in the manger on the night of His birth is “*Brephos*” – meaning “*little infant.*” However, the Greek word used in Matthew, when the Wise Men came and found Jesus “*in the house*” is “*paidion*” – meaning, “*a growing, or developed child.*”

After the Wise Men told Herod of the star, and the birth of the King of the Jews, Herod’s actions definitely indicate that Jesus must have been about two years old, because Herod ordered all children “**of two years and under,**” – “**according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the Wise Men**” (verse 16), to be put to death, because Jesus, the newborn King, would be within that age bracket.

The astronomer’s speculation does not offer evidence for the “*Star of Bethlehem*” here. Matthew 2:9 states, “*And lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.*” *This* guiding light was called “*a star*” because of its luminous quality, comparative smallness, and course-following character – like the pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night, that guided the children of Israel through the wilderness, guided these Wise Men to the *exact* house where Jesus was.

The compound Greek preposition “*epano,*” translated as “*over*” in Matthew 2:9, literally means, “*upon-upward,*” and could be correctly rendered, “*on top of.*” The English word “*over*” might lead one to believe that it could be some separated distance above, however the Greek does not allow for this.

The use of this particular Greek preposition, “*epano,*” is the same one used in Matthew 28:2, to describe the angel sitting “*upon*” the rock – the rolled away stone of Jesus’ sepulcher.

When the Wise Men arrived at Bethlehem an unerring and direct guidance was furnished them that finally marked out the *very* house of Bethlehem – and, “*settled down upon* – [rested upon] – *the young Child*” to whom such glory belongs (Matthew 2:9).

My personal belief is that God revealed a conjunction of stars in the East to alert the Wise Men, which led them to Jerusalem, as they started for Bethlehem, God sent a special shining angel to direct and to guide the Wise Men to the Christ child.

Notice the flurry of angel activity around the birth of Jesus. The angel's annunciation of Jesus to Mary – Luke 1:26-35; The angelic announcement to the shepherds – Luke 2:8-15; The angel appeared to Joseph to tell him of the virgin birth – Matthew 1:20; The Wise Men see a “*star*” - a peculiar appearance to attract their attention in the heavens that leads them to the *exact* house the Christ child was and then appears “*over*” - (on top of) - Him.

This “*star*” was able to move about in the heavens, finally guiding the Wise Men to the very house in Bethlehem and settled down, not only to stand over the house, but also to “*over*” the one Child to whom, only, such glory belonged.

Revelation 9:1 speaks of an “*angel-star*,” or, a star referred to as an angel. It reads, “*A star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit.*” This is an intelligent person, not an actual meteor or shooting star. Personal pronouns and personal acts are ascribed to him. Only an intelligent being could be given a key to a material place and a command to obey, as it states here.

Evidently for prophetic reason this angel assumed the form of a star. (See Numbers 24:17 - “*a star out of Jacob*”).

The Glory of the Lord

Luke 2:9, telling of the shepherds witnessing the angel's announcement of the Christ child's birth, says, “*And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the **glory** of the Lord shone round about them.*” Throughout the Old Testament “*the glory of the Lord*” was manifested by bright light. This blazing light was seen in the Holy of holies of the Tabernacle; in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led Israel through the wilderness; Moses witnessed it on the mountain when God gave him the Ten Commandments; the disciples saw it at Mount Transfiguration when Jesus' “*face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light.*”

John, in Revelation, describes Jesus Christ's appearance now as, “*His countenance as the sun shines in his strength*” (Revelation 1:16).

Scripture describes Christ's return to earth in “**blazing light!**” Matthew 24:27, states, “*Son of man coming as lightning cometh out of the east and shines even unto the west, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.*” And verse 30 continues, “*then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory!*” When Christ returns it will be in a shining, blazing, dazzling light!

God's “*glory*” descends to earth in the form of glittering light.

The Hebrew word that is translated as “*star*” is, “*Kowkab*” and does not always refer to a star as we think of one, but rather, means “*to shine forth, or blaze forth,*” or, “*anything that blazes!*” The presence of God on earth was often symbolized, or manifested by “*Shekinah glory.*”