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## THE STAR OF MESSIAH

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Matthew 2:2 records the words of the Magi: "We have seen *his* star". This article considers theories by prominent astronomers who attempt to explain the Star and how it was recognized. What was the Star? Was this astrology or messianic prophecy?

### INTRODUCTION

The Magi witnessed a star that they somehow recognized as "his" star and it prompted their historic journey to Palestine in search of a newborn king of the Jews. On the last leg of their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem they witnessed the star a second time. Two issues surround the star. What exactly was it? And, just how did the Magi identify it as "his" star? These present a real challenge because Matthew is the only source for the story and his account is silent on both issues. Few scholars have attempted to explain both the star and how the Magi recognized it as "his" star.

### Astronomer John Kepler And Astrology

In 1614, the famous German astronomer John Kepler suggested that the Magi used astrology to recognize "his" star and he thought a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC might have inspired their trip to Palestine (Caspar, 1993). Then, later, on their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, they witnessed a nova, a star that suddenly flares up in brilliance like the nova Kepler had witnessed in 1604. Kepler speculated that ancient astrologers would see Jupiter as a king of planets and might associate Saturn with the Jews since their Sabbath was Saturn's day. Kepler was the first in history to invoke astrology to explain "his" star. Hughes (1979) has recently revived this theory. The proposal is attractive but it has several flaws. Planetary conjunctions repeat every few decades and a close conjunction of these same planets had occurred in 66BC (Pritchard, 1856), yet this earlier event had not prompted the Magi to journey to Palestine. So, why would a conjunction in 7BC inspire such a journey when an earlier conjunction had not? Furthermore, at

closest conjunction in 7BC, these planets were still one degree apart (equivalent to two diameters of the moon), and it seems unlikely that regular sky observers would describe such a conjunction as a “star”. In addition, Kepler’s imaginative astrology associating Jupiter with a king and Saturn with the Jews is 17<sup>th</sup> century astrology, but he could not demonstrate that this had also been the astrology of the Magi around the time of Christ’s birth.

### **Astronomer Knut Lundmark And Messianic Prophecy**

In 1953, Swedish astronomer Knut Lundmark offered a different approach that avoided astrology altogether (Lundmark, 1953). He suggested that the Magi had witnessed a brilliant nova while they were in their homeland, and it was this same nova they witnessed again months later when they made their trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. To explain how the Magi recognized a nova as “his” star, Lundmark researched the origin and development of the messianic idea in Israel. He felt that an ancient oracle in the Jewish Torah at Numbers 24:17 had shaped and transformed messianic expectations by connecting a star with a Jewish ruler who was to be the messiah. Lundmark described how Balaam, a contemporary of Moses, had “glimpsed the coming Messianic era” and predicted “the Messiah Star”. For Lundmark, the Magi reference to “his” star meant Messiah’s star. Messianic prophecy and a nova as its fulfillment can be traced back to the earliest Christian writings and paintings.

### **Messiah’s Star**

From the earliest times, Christian authors insisted that the Magi had recognized the star through messianic prophecy. Justin Martyr (100-165) in *Dial.*106: “Moses revealed that the same man (Jesus) would arise as a star by means of the race of Abraham when he said, A star shall arise out of Jacob and a ruler out of Israel.” Irenaeus (130-200) in *Adv. Haer.* 3.9.3 (Harvey ii.31):“Of Christ’s star also Balaam for his part did thus prophecy, A star shall be drawn out of Jacob, and a chief out of Israel.” Origen (185-254) in *c. Celsum* 1.61:“The star which appeared at the birth of Jesus was prophesied by Balaam, as Moses recorded, A star shall appear out of Jacob, and a man shall rise up out of Israel. I think the Magi had the

prophecies of Balaam, and they guessed the man foretold by the star had arrived.” Eusebius (260-339) in *Dem. Ev.* 9.1: “Balaam’s prediction of the star was most likely preserved among the Magi.” Athanasius (296-373) in *Incarn. Verbi Dei* 33: “Moses recognized the importance and truth of the matter (of Christ’s coming). ‘There shall arise a star from Jacob and a man from Israel.’” Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in *In diem natalem Christi* (PM46:1133D): “Behold how the Magi, who stem from Balaam, observed, according to his prophecy, the newly appointed star.” Jerome (345-420) in *Comm. In Matth.*: “The star rose in the East as Balaam prophesied to his successors who recognized it by prophetic means.”

The Christian use of this text as messianic was consistent with ancient Jewish scholarship. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in Alexandria in Egypt in a version known as the Septuagint. It rendered the text at Numbers 24:17: “A Star shall rise out of Jacob, A Man (ἄνθρωπος) shall spring out of Israel.” The modern *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971) considers this Septuagint translation “the first messianic interpretation of any biblical verse in history”. In a later translation of the Torah into Aramaic, the reference is unambiguous: “A King shall arise out of Jacob, And the Messiah be anointed from Israel.” Balaam’s oracle connects the star and the ruler so intimately that the Jews called the star ‘the Star of Messiah’ and they called the expected ruler Bar Kokhba or ‘Son of the Star’. Edersheim (1906) quotes from two ancient Jewish commentaries. The *Messiah-Haggadah* expected “the Star of Messiah would shine forth from the east two years before his coming”, and the *Book of Elijah* speculated that “the Star would appear in the east two years before the birth of Messiah” (A. Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash* [Leipzig & Vienna 1853-1878]). The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, have provided some insight into the Jewish community at Qumran around the time of Christ’s birth, and there, this text of Numbers 24:17 formed part of an anthology of scriptures used concerning the Messiah (CD 7.18-26; cf T Levi 18:3; T Judah 24:1). A modern Jewish scholar acknowledges that Numbers 24:17 was one of several “scriptural texts considered as the foundation of the Messianic teachings” at Qumran (Vermes, 1978). Even as late as 132AD, there is evidence of this star/messiah connection in Palestine, when the commander of

a rebellion against Roman occupation assumed the “messianic” title Bar Kokhba or Son of the Star and issued coins that display a star above the temple mount (Yadin, 1971). Numbers 24:17 has a history of messianic interpretation among the Jews between 300BC and 132AD.

### **A Brilliant Nova**

Several early Christian authors explicitly identified the Star of Bethlehem as a nova. Ignatius (35-107) in *Eph.* 19.2: “A star in the heavens outshone all the stars and its newness (*nova*) caused astonishment.” The *Protevangelium* of James (circa 150) 15.7 attributes the following words to the Magi: “We saw a very great star shining among the stars and dimming them.” Origen (185-254) in *c. Celsum* 1.58: “It was a new star (*nova stella*) unlike any of the other well-known bodies.” Eusebius (260-339) in *Dem. Ev.* 9.5: “The star was new (*nova*) and a stranger among the usual lights of heaven. It was not one of the many known stars.” Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in *In diem natalem Christi*: “...the Magi observed the newly appointed star.” A nova was the earliest explanation for the star. It is considered the best explanation among modern astronomers. George Gamow (1940), a professor of theoretical physics at George Washington University, remarks that “extremely bright novae may be found in ancient history, and in particular, it is very possible that the Star of Bethlehem represented one of these cosmic catastrophes.” Arthur C. Clarke (1980), world-recognized through his popular television series, says: “For a serious astronomical explanation of the Star of Bethlehem, my favourite theory is that it was a supernova.” Astronomer James Mullaney wrote in the *Science Digest* of 1975: “The considered opinion of nearly all who have studied the question is that a nova or supernova seems the most likely explanation for the Christmas Star of all those put forth to date.”

A nova is a star that suddenly erupts into brilliance with spectacular rays of light radiating in all directions. To an observer, it seems to burst onto the scene at a sky location where no star was visible before, and to the observer, it seems like a new star. The star was too dim to be seen before its eruption; then it explodes in a display of brilliance; and then it gradually fades from sight over a period of

some months. Simply put, a nova is an exploding sun. These are rare events and only a few have been documented in the history of astronomy. A nova was recorded in China in 1054, initially visible for 23 days during daylight, and it outshone all the stars for two months, and then gradually faded away after 22 months. A nova was recorded in 1572 and it was also visible during daylight for the first 10 days and dominated the sky for several weeks, and it vanished from sight after 15 months. Kepler had witnessed a nova in 1604 and it was a little brighter than Jupiter and it faded away in 12 months.

In Lundmark's view, the Magi had witnessed a brilliant nova of this kind in their homeland of Mesopotamia or Persia. They had access to the Torah where they read in Balaam's oracle that a future star was expected to accompany a future Jewish ruler. "A star *shall* rise" were the words of the oracle, and they would take this to infer the appearance of a new star or nova. They concluded: "we have seen messiah's star". Months later, after traveling to Palestine, they saw the same nova again as they made the six-mile trip from Jerusalem to the tiny village of Bethlehem.

### **Catacomb Paintings**

This story is illustrated in paintings in the underground catacombs in Rome where many Christians were buried in the early centuries of this era. The star is always shown as a single point of light with brilliant rays in all directions (Photo 1), and never depicted as two points of light like a conjunction of planets or as a comet with a tail. In one catacomb painting, four of the Magi stand and listen attentively to an elderly man who is seated as he reads from an open scroll. A faint halo can be seen around his head for he represents a holy man (Moses), who reads from his Torah scroll, likely open at the Oracles of Balaam. One of the Magi, on the left, points to a brilliant star overhead (Photo 2). The same theme appears in the famous nativity painting in the Priscilla catacomb that has been dated to about 150. One of the Magi stands before a mother who is seated as she nurses her infant. The baby seems startled by the presence of the astronomer who points skyward to a brilliant star overhead. In his left hand, we can make out the circular outline of a Torah scroll. The astronomer is pointing to the star as the Star of

Messiah and explaining to the mother from Numbers 24:17 that her son is Bar Kokhba, 'Son of the Star' (Photo 3).

### **A work of fiction?**

Astronomers who offer explanations for the Star of Bethlehem take Matthew's story of the magi and the star as authentic history. In contrast, a modern theologian views it as a work of fiction. Brown (1977) writes: "Some of the events, which are quite implausible as history, have now been understood as rewritings of OT scenes and themes. For instance, Matthew's story of the Magi who saw the star of the Davidic Messiah at its rising is an echo of the OT story of Balaam, a type of magus from the East, who saw the star rise out of Jacob." Brown ascribes Matthew's gospel to an unknown author who took Mark's gospel and embellished it and prefaced it with a birth narrative of his own composition. However, according to Brown, the author was not writing history. The nativity scene with the magi and the star existed only in his imagination. Brown has no need to explain the star, for he has explained it away. In reviewing astronomical theories for the star, he concedes that a new star "corresponds literally to Matthew's description" but he feels "the theory of a 'new star' is purely a guess."

In regards to the star, it matters little whether the apostle Matthew wrote the book that bears his name. The fact is that this gospel was produced between 65 and 85 by someone (whether by Matthew or not) who had information about a star appearance that attracted the attention of sky observers around the time of Christ's birth. A few decades later, Ignatius also had information about a star at Christ's birth, and his information was clearly independent of Matthew, for he relates that it was a spectacular nova that outshone all the stars. The author of the Protevangelium had similar information. And Origen and Eusebius. If Matthew's gospel had never been written, the information in Ignatius and Origen and Eusebius is more than adequate to raise the prospect of a nova appearance near Christ's birth.

The subject of exploding stars is of special interest in modern astronomy. The discipline of astrophysics (the study of the interior of stars) is only a few decades old. The first pulsar was detected as

recently as 1967, and, it so happens, by an astronomy graduate with an Ulster accent. A pulsar is the collapsed core of a star that exploded sometime in the past. Over 500 pulsars have now been identified and the count continues. Most were formed vast ages ago. One has been identified as the remnant of the nova recorded by the Chinese in 1054. It is possible that astronomers will identify one of these pulsars as the remnant of a nova that dominated the night sky two thousand years ago. The nova theory still holds promise. It can still fire the imagination.

PHOTO 1. This is the earliest nativity scene and it is in the Priscilla Catacomb at 430 Via Salaria, Rome. Circa 150. Mary is seated nursing her newborn. The baby seems frightened by the presence of one of the Magi, who stands with a scroll in his left hand as he points to a brilliant star overhead. (McIvor, 1988)





PHOTO 2. . This painting in the Catacomb of Via Latina at 258 Via Latina, Rome, depicts one of the Magi pointing to the Star with rays of light shooting in all directions. Circa 320. (McIvor, 1988)



PHOTO 3. This painting in the Catacomb of Marcus & Marcellianus on the Via Ardeatine, Rome, shows four magi listening to the Torah. The one on the left points to a star with blazing rays. Circa 250. (McIvor, 1988)



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