

The Star of the Messiah

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Texts: Matthew 2, Luke 2:1-39

1. *The wise men from the east*

At the Christmas cribs, one can always see Joseph and Mary with the infant Jesus, shepherds and animals, often also a star with tail, and the "three holy kings" Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, who are bringing gold and frankincense and myrrh. The biblical text, however, says neither "three", nor "holy", nor "kings" – nor does it provide any names.

In the text, they are called the wise men from the East, literally *magoi*, "magi". This has, however, nothing to do with magic, sorcery, or horoscopes. It probably designates a caste of Persian priests from the tribe of the Medes (namely, the Magians) – sages, scholars, astronomers, medics, who were active at the king's court in the capital. The "East", or Orient, indicates some country of the Near East, probably Babylonia or Persia.

In 593 BC, the Chaldeans brought many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to Babylon, and with them Daniel. There he was made the chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. In 539 BC, the Medes and Persians captured Babylon, and Daniel was made one of the three governors set over the 120 satraps. Now, the royal city was Susa in winter and Ekbatana in the Persian uplands in summer. Already in 721 BC, the Assyrians had conquered Samaria and deported the inhabitants into exile – into Median cities, among others (2 Kings 18:9-11). In New Testament times, there were still Jews in Media (Acts 2:9).

Daniel was faithful to God, and *God* gave him wisdom and the interpretation of dreams. But among the Chaldean priests and sages, there also were black sheep dealing in astrology and magic. Under the Persians and later, Babylon slowly declined. And even the Chaldean priests who were there evidently did not maintain an allegiance to Daniel's God, but rather to the idols Marduk and Ishtar (in the bible: Merodach and Ashtoreth). At the time of Jesus, Philo of Alexandria distinguished between "genuine magi" who devoted themselves to science and those magi who practiced sorcery.

The same Greek word, *magoi*, is used for Simon in Samaria and Elymas of Cyprus, and is there correctly translated as "sorcerers". Apparently, these two were working more in the tradition of the late Babylonian Chaldean priests than in the tradition of Daniel and his wise men in Ekbatana. We know from modern times, as well, that the same word can assume contradictory meanings. Bible believers, but also Islamic terrorists, are referred to as "fundamentalists". And participants in the crusades initiated by the popes, as well as inquisitors who burned heretics at the stake are called "Christians".

The wise men of Matthew 2 came from the "Orient", literally "from the ascents" (plural), i.e. somewhere in the east. Most probably, this was Ekbatana in the Persian uplands. The text of Matthew 2 does not give the slightest hint that these "*magoi*" practiced magic, not even any clear indication of astrology. Most translators, therefore, prefer the positive designation "wise men" – although at that time, there was probably no clear-cut dividing line between astronomy and astrology.

2. *The star and its significance*

The wise men came to Jerusalem and said:

Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

Here it says literally, "his star in the ascent" (singular), which could mean either "his star in the east", or "his star in its ascent". Astrologers use the designation "in the ascent" for star positions. This does not prove, however, that the wise men of Matthew 2 were involved in astrology. What

kind of star did they see? And why did they see in it a sign for a newly born king of the Jews? Different known astronomical events have been proposed as an explanation, e.g.:

1) In 7-6 BC, there were three close encounters of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, two of these additionally with Mars in triple encounters. All this happened in the constellation of Pisces (fishes). But it was only in the Middle Ages that a rabbi assigned this constellation to the Jews. And one cannot very well designate such conjunctions as *one* star, as the wise men did.

2) In March, 5 BC, a tailed comet appeared in the east and was visible for at least 70 days. The wise men could have designated this comet as the same star which they saw "in the ascent". And after their leaving Jerusalem, it could have stood about over the house where the child was.

3) In 3-2 BC, there were three very close conjunctions of Jupiter with Regulus ("small king"), the brightest star in the constellation Leo ("lion"), and two with the planet Venus. The lion has a much closer connection with Israel than the fishes. The Messiah is called the "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). Of course, Regulus in the constellation Leo is a fixed star, while Jupiter moves with relation to the fixed stars. Thus one could well talk of the *one* travelling "star of the Messiah".

Luke says that Jesus was born at the time of the first registration under Quirinius (2:2) and that John started baptizing in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (3:1). Unfortunately, both of these landmarks are not datable with sufficient accuracy, so that any year between 7 and 2 BC is still possible for the birth of Jesus. Therefore, we cannot know for sure which of these astronomical events was designated as "his star" by the wise men. Or did God even send them a supernatural star?

Had God spoken to the wise men? He spoke to other Gentiles, as well. Since the Assyrian exile of Israel and the Babylonian exile of Judah there were Jewish colonies in Media and Babylonia. The wise men would certainly have known something of the promises of a Jewish redeemer-king, especially through the prophet Daniel.

At least 700 years before Daniel's time, God had, through Balaam, given the promise of the star of the Messiah. According to old traditions, this promise was brought from the Persian Empire to Jerusalem in the sixth century BC, after having been archived in a tower which Daniel had built in Ekbatana. A tower at 2000 m altitude in the highlands was, of course, also ideal for astronomical observations. Even after the time of Jesus a Jewish priest was said to have taken care of the archive in this tower. The wise men could therefore know of the star of the Messiah.

We shall now have a closer look at what Matthew and Luke say about the star.

3. The star led them to Jesus (Matthew 2)

When Herodes heard the words of the wise men, he became nervous and asked the scribes *where exactly* the king of the Jews was supposed to be born. Then he asked the wise men *when exactly* the star appeared to them. So he sent them to Bethlehem to find the child and to report back to him. And the wise men went.

And behold, the star that they had seen in its ascent went before them until it came to rest over [the place] where the child was.

The exclamation, "behold", means that they were surprised at seeing the star again. Had they lost sight of it during their long travel? As astronomers, they would not have had any problems finding a planet again, for a comet, it would be more difficult. But they knew that they had to go to Israel. Why did they have to ask for the exact location when they came to Jerusalem? Didn't the star lead them? Or was this guidance more of an astrological type, without indicating an exact location?

But then, the star really "went before them"; here, the Greek text has the imperfect tense – thus, the star really *guided* them during a certain time. And then "it came to rest"; here, on the contrary, the text has the aorist tense (corresponding to the French *passé simple*) – it *suddenly* stopped. More specifically, it stood "over the place where the child was". Seeing this, "they rejoiced

exceedingly with great joy" – even before they saw anything of the child – they had to go "into the house" before they "saw the child with Mary his mother"! This sudden joy points to their seeing and understanding a sign God gave them through the behavior of the star. Was it a clearly miraculous sign?

After their visit, God ordered them in a dream not to return to Herod. So they travelled back into their country on a different way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream...

The way the Greek text expresses this shows that it happened in the *same* night already. The angel of the Lord ordered Joseph to flee to Egypt, because Herod intended to kill the child. And in the course of the *same* night, Joseph and Mary set off with Jesus to go to Egypt.

This is what we read in Matthew 2. Now let's look at Luke 2!

4. In Bethlehem and Jerusalem (Luke 2)

Joseph and Mary went up from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea (Nazareth is 100 km north and Bethlehem 8 km south of Jerusalem). Bethlehem, the city of David, was Joseph's home town. There, they had to get registered by the Roman administration.

While they were in Bethlehem, Jesus was born. Because there was no place for them in the "inn", they laid him in a manger. There is no mention of a stable here. In Israel of 2000 years ago, a manger was possibly in the open, perhaps below a makeshift roof, or under a rocky ledge. Others say an ancient stable with a manger for animals could have been under the same roof as the human living quarters, directly accessible from these. But in any case, at least the "sheepfold" mentioned in John 10 was an open area enclosed by a wall, but without a roof.

Actually, the text does not mention an inn, either. The Greek word here translated as "inn" is used by Luke for the guest room where Jesus celebrated the last Passah with his disciples. Thus, it could mean here that there was no place for them in the guest room – perhaps in the house of some relatives who first had to provide an accommodation to other, older relatives during this registration. The normal word for "inn" only occurs in the story of the Good Samaritan.

In any case, the shepherds in Bethlehem "found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger".

When an Israelite boy was 8 days old, he had to be circumcised. This might be done anywhere. But in the case of a first born, the parents had to bring him to the temple with an offering when he was 40 days old.

[So] they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord – as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord" – and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons".

That they offered two turtledoves or pigeons instead of a lamb shows their poverty. In the temple, they met Simeon and Anna. These came to bless them and to proclaim prophetically what God intended to do with the child.

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

5. In Egypt

When did they go to Egypt? It was immediately after the visit of the wise men from the east. And when did they go to Jerusalem? This was 40 days after Jesus was born. Were they back from Egypt already? To go from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Jerusalem, they had to travel for at

least 600 km. In those days – and with a newborn baby – that certainly made for more than 40 days of traveling. Furthermore, we are told that they remained in Egypt until Herod was dead and the angel of the Lord told them they should now return to Israel.

But when he [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Thus, when they returned from Egypt, they definitely did *not* go to Jerusalem (or Bethlehem), but to Nazareth.

We have two clear statements about where Joseph and Mary were with Jesus at specific times:

1) Luke 2:39 – After the presentation in the temple, they *immediately* went to Nazareth:

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

2) Matthew 2:13-14 – After the visit of the wise men, they *immediately* went to Egypt:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt...

Did the wise men come to the manger in Bethlehem? After the visit of the wise men, Joseph and Mary went to Egypt with Jesus, but after the presentation in the temple, they went to Nazareth. Isn't this a contradiction? What's the solution of this geographical puzzle?

The traditional opinion of the wise men coming to the manger in Bethlehem is mistaken! They did not come to Bethlehem but to Nazareth! And this certainly happened at least a few months after Jesus was born.

6. The star led the wise men to Nazareth

Naturally, after the testimony of the scribes, the wise men expected to have to go to Bethlehem. But if the ascent of the star in the east happened when Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary were back in Nazareth with Jesus when the wise men came to Jerusalem. The traveling distance from Ekbatana to Jerusalem was about 1600 km. For their trip, including the necessary preparations, we may well estimate about 8 weeks or more. This is also hinted at by the murder of all boys in Bethlehem "who were two years old or under":

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men [because they did not report to him], became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

When, after their audience with Herod, the wise men saw the star again, they were surprised. Were they surprised because it didn't lead them south, to Bethlehem, but north? Then, in Nazareth, the star suddenly stopped – exactly above a certain house. This unexpected, clear sign was such an overwhelming experience for them that "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" – before even having seen the child.

Celestial objects display an apparent movement when the observer walks, and appear to stop when he does. But being experienced astronomers, the wise men would not have been surprised at such normal apparent behavior of a celestial object. Furthermore, a planet could not stand on the northern sky. A comet or fixed star, on the other hand, would just have stood above some town (as seen from their position). But it could not indicate a specific house. Thus, they would again have had to ask for the newborn king of the Jews, and could hardly have received any answer to their question.

According to my interpretation, it was a special, supernatural star. Similarly, the pillar of fire which went before the Israelites in the desert was hardly a volcanic eruption, but supernatural.

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother...

Thus, they went "into the house", not into a stable. Quite certainly, Jesus was not lying in a manger after two months or more. Also, Joseph and Mary probably did not remain in Bethlehem with the child until after 40 days they could bring their offering, but went back to Nazareth.

Matthew mentions Nazareth for the first time *after* their return from Egypt, when Joseph received the divine directive to go to Galilee. Does this imply that they had not been there before? No, the text says why Nazareth is mentioned here: with this event, another Old Testament prediction was being fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Why did Joseph need a special directive to return to Galilee? It could have to do with their poverty: they might have left hardly anything in Nazareth when they went to Bethlehem. But they had received quite a series of prophetic promises about what Jesus would do for Israel – by means of diverse angelic messages, through Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna, the wise men – in addition to the Old Testament prophecies. So perhaps they first thought they *had* to move to Jerusalem. Being a carpenter or builder, Joseph would probably not have had much difficulty finding work anywhere. But when the angel sent them to Galilee, it was obvious for them to go to Nazareth where they had lived before.

7. The star of the promised redeemer

There are many Old Testament prophecies pointing to the promised Messiah, and I assume the wise men in Ekbatana knew about them from Daniel. But there are also much older Messianic promises, which could have come to the wise men even through non-Israelites.

After Adam and Eve's fall, God said to the serpent (Genesis 3:15):

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; *he* shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Thus, a descendant of Eve was decreed to definitely vanquish Satan (bruising his head), but at the same time made to fall (his heel being bruised). How is this possible? It was millennia later that it finally became clear that the Messiah took upon himself the sins of all other humans, dying on the cross, but in this way vanquishing Satan and sin for ever, since he is God's Son and without sin.

Shortly before his death in Egypt, Jacob blessed his sons. About Judah, he said, in part (Genesis 49:10):

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and the obedience of the nations is his.

The "Shiloh" (an unknown word) probably means, "to whom it belongs", that is, to whom the ruler's staff belongs. A future king from the tribe of Judah is being promised. And he will rule over the nations – not just over Israel.

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan, the prophet Balaam said under divine inspiration (Numbers 24:17):

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...

Again, the future ruler of Israel is indicated. He will shine like a star.

But not David is intended to be this king – and much less any of the other kings in Israel. David himself emphasized that not he himself is the Messiah (Psalm 110:1):

The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool!"

God said this to David's Lord, and who is this? It can only refer to the Messiah, and Jesus himself confirmed this (Matthew 22:42-45):

"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, «The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet»? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

The Messiah, from David's posterity, is at the same time David's Lord. And his enemies will be subjected to his rule by God.

Isaiah and Micah prophesied in the 8th century BC. In Micah 5:2 it says:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me the one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

This is the text the scribes quoted to Herod when the wise men had come from the east. The promised ruler comes from Bethlehem, like David. But he is not only a human king like David, but his origin is in eternity.

And Isaiah 11:10 talks of...

... the Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Jesse was King David's father. The Messiah is called "the Root of Jesse". And he establishes his kingdom of peace not only over Israel but over all nations. Clearly, Isaiah was not talking about King David who was living 300 years earlier.

Various prophets called the Messiah "Branch", e.g. Zechariah (3:8):

... behold, I will bring my servant the Branch.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament has *Anatolé* for "Branch". The Greek New Testament uses the same word for "ascent", e.g. the ascent of the star which the wise men saw in the East. And Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied that John would be the forerunner of the Messiah, and again calls the Messiah "Ascent" (Luke 1:78).

... the tender mercy of our God, whereby the Sunrise [*Anatolé*] shall visit us from on high ...

This is but a small selection from the many Messianic prophecies. The portrait of the promised Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, who came from heaven to Earth to redeem us, was becoming clearer and clearer. At the end of Revelation, Jesus told John (Revelation 22:16):

I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.