

<https://www.snopes.com/news/2019/12/11/can-astronomy-explain-the-biblical-star-of-bethlehem/>

from NASA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE1WjvtpIts>

Consolmagno and the STAR and Magi

here is a site with numerous articles on Matt's Story

<https://www.vofoundation.org/faith-and-science/faq/star-of-bethlehem/>

This is what Bro. Guy Consolmagno, head of the Vatican Observatory, says:

Point 1

What was the star? We don't know. We weren't there.

There are plenty of theories, some more likely than others, but **none of them are certain**. Some people are convinced that the story of a star is but a devout bit of myth-making, invented by St. Matthew (the only evangelist to tell the story) as a way of emphasizing Jesus' kingship. Others have identified this star with a chance alignment of planets, or a comet, or a supernova. My own favorite theory comes from a book by the American astronomer Michael Molnar, *Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (Rutgers University Press, 2000).

Molnar starts with three things in the story that puzzled him, and always puzzled me. First, any celestial phenomena high up enough to be visible "in the east" would be high above a very wide swath of territory; indeed any comet or nova or alignment of planets would have the whole world spinning underneath it. [my note: **So a comet is out!**] How could something in the sky lead the astrologers specifically to Jerusalem? Secondly, comets and supernovae are rather frightening phenomena. What kind of celestial event would signify the birth of a king? Why did it take Wise Men (and foreigners, at that) to notice it?

Molnar answers all three in terms of the astrology of the day. Each region of the world was associated with a different Zodiac sign, he says, with the region around Jerusalem being connected with **Aries, the Ram**. [my note: **House of the Hebrews**] he argues such an alignment of planets was well established as a sign of kingship.

And Molnar points out that the key to the alignment was having the planets rise with the Sun -- what is called a heliacal rising. Such conjunctions of planets and Sun were long considered significant. Molnar then shows that just such an alignment of planets, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, and Saturn, all rise with the Sun in **April of 6 BC...** in the constellation Aries.

It sounds convincing to me. But at least two other members of my own community at the Vatican Observatory are absolutely convinced that this theory holds no water.

POINT 2

Indeed, the bigger puzzle in the story to me is that God—or the Evangelist—would use **astrology** to announce the coming of Christ.

Astronomers (like me) condemn astrology for the simple reason that it doesn't work. Christians (like me), and the Jews long before us, condemn astrology for a more subtle reason: even if it worked, it would be wrong. Though knowledge of the stars and the seasons is wisdom that comes from God, **predicting our personal future with astrology is a denial of free will or personal responsibility**. It is an attempt to make us think '*the stars*' control our fates independent of God.

So why did God choose Magi? How is it that, this one time, their predictions did work? Indeed, it was foreign intellectuals who found the Messiah before all the experts of the Temple. It is just one more example of how God can use even our foolishness, even our astronomy, to lead us to Him.

And Consolmagno writes: (InThinking Faith Magazine)

Two thousand years ago, eastern astrologers with their flawed belief that the fortunes of men are told in the stars, followed their mistaken calculations to discover **a king very different** from what they were expecting. [my note: but this still led them to the TRUTH, XT]

The astonishing part of the story of the Wise Men is not that they would predict the birth of a king from the positions of the planets. A fortune teller could have done that. Nor is it that they'd travel far to find out if they were right. Instead, it's that they would be able to **recognize this little tiny boy-child, as the king** they were seeking, the child they found in swaddling clothes in a manger. [my note: Consolmagno forgot that Jesus was NOT in a manger then. The Gospel says HOUSE, which was the house-cave I took the picture of—which, by the way, was where the manger had been! So not exactly wrong. And the wooden manger was still there.]

The whole question of 'what was the Star of Bethlehem,' asked of a Vatican astronomer, has hidden within it all sorts of wildly wrong assumptions. It assumes that there is some factual 'answer' that can be demonstrated in the same way, mysterious to most journalists; that science seems to speak definitively on lots of other things. (*There isn't; and for that matter, it doesn't. Science describes nature, it tries to explain nature, but our descriptions and explanations are never definitive. They are always open to further refinements and development.*) [Consolmagno's words!]

And it assumes that the astronomical question is the question that's most interesting. In fact, when I go back and read those twelve verses in Matthew's Gospel (2:1-12) my own first reaction is to ask, 'what was that all about?'

Just made up—fiction?

The easiest way to deal with this story is to assume it is a pious tale, probably written to signify that Jesus was as much a king as any secular ruler. Caesar Augustus, after all, used astrological signs to shore up his legitimacy as Rome's emperor. More subtly, it can be read as a foreshadowing of how the message of Jesus would find fertile ground among the Gentiles.

But there are some nagging problems with that simple explanation.

Were such 'pious tales' common enough among the culture in which Matthew's Gospel was written that anyone reading this back then would have understood that it was meant to be taken symbolically? We can't say for sure.

Is the outreach to the Gentiles a big part of Matthew's Gospel, or was he speaking more to a Jewish audience? [my note: NO, for the Jews]

There's another question that bothers me: if this is a pious story about wise Gentiles accepting Jesus, why would such 'wise men' be seen as coming from the east? Why have the wise men not come from Greece or Rome, the source of culture and wisdom during that epoch, and the home of the Gentiles who were coming into Matthew's Church?

And why were they astrologers?

Astrology held a most peculiar position in Jewish culture. The study of astrology for forecasting the future was strongly forbidden in any number of places in Hebrew scripture. Where modern astronomers think astrology is wrong because it doesn't work, the Jews recognized it as morally wrong. Asserting the power of the stars denies the power of God.

But that doesn't mean the Jews didn't believe in it. My Jewish friends tell me that you can find mosaics of the zodiac in ancient synagogues. [So they knew about it.]

There is a Jewish parallel to the Matthew story in a *midrash* [a story told to illustrate a point] on the birth of Abraham, which describes how his birth was foretold by astrologers as a threat to the king of Babylon, such that Abraham wound up being hidden for three years from the soldiers of the king. [my note: Like MOSES! was saved from the Pharaoh] Scholars can argue how much

this story and that of Matthew influenced one another; for our purposes, it's enough to note its existence as evidence of the complex attitude of Judaism towards astrology.

In any event, I can only leave open the possibility that the story in Matthew is a parable with a message, but not a factual account of an actual astronomical event. Of course, the other extreme is also possible. Maybe there was a totally moving star, guiding three kings to Bethlehem.

I don't particularly like this interpretation either, however. For one thing, it's internally inconsistent. Why wouldn't anyone in Jerusalem notice such a star? [my note: conjunctions of stars are only visible from a limited location, in this case Northern Iraq.]

And it is inconsistent with the way we see God acting, over and over again, in salvation history. God has the power to create such a UFO, for sure. But in the same way, **He also had the power to send Jesus into the world fully grown, a Deity dressed up in a man-suit like some eastern avatar, surrounded by unmistakable pomp and power: the image of the expected messiah that no one could have mistaken.** Instead, as always, God showed what we might call supernatural restraint: choosing instead to come **as an infant**, born into the world as any other human, and subject to the very laws that He had used to form this universe.

And so what would be so out of line to time this birth with a divine coincidence, a chance arrangement of stars and planets?

A sign, by its very nature, means something out of the ordinary. But the one thing about the stars is that, with certain exceptions, they are orderly and predictable. The same constellations appear during the same seasons every year, and any change in their positions is **so slow** as to be undetectable by the human eye during one person's lifetime.

A 'supernova' would leave behind remnants. But there are no remains of a supernova from two thousand years ago.

Comets are signs of doom, not joy at the birth of a king.

Planets do change their positions among the stars. The trick, though, is to find a solution that is consistent with the temporal setting of Matthew (probably in the spring, when shepherds would be out at night tending their flocks, in a year while Herod was still alive and king); consistent with the description of the 'star' (something to do with its rising); consistent with an explanation of how it would indicate the birth of a king, and how Judea would be indicated as the location of this birth; and consistent with the apparent fact that only astrologers were wise to this event.

My own personal favorite solution to these constraints is in Michael Molnar's 2000 book, *The Star of Bethlehem*. He argues that there was a conjunction of all the planets and the new Moon, similar to that used by Augustus to support his own royal birth, occurring in the constellation Aries (which he argues is connected with Judea [House of Hebrews]), in late March of 4 BC. Most appealing, this conjunction occurred when the planets rose with the Sun in the east – hence fitting the Matthew description, while explaining why only astrologers were aware of this event. And indeed it's rather startling to realize that such an event really did occur in the sky about the time when Jesus may well have been born.

But was this really what Matthew was talking about? Because the real message is outside the realm of astronomical calculations. Outside of SCIENCE; It is about FAITH. For, like the Magi, the very core of our being is expressed in the path we have chosen, by the stars that have guided us to the New-born King. By the Faith we choose.