

### Follow His Star

*God calls each of us to receive the Light of His Truth in Jesus*

.....**Isaiah 60: 1 – 6**.....

***“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. <sup>2</sup>See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. <sup>3</sup>Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look about you; All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. <sup>5</sup>Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. <sup>6</sup>Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.”***

.....**Matthew 2: 1 – 12**.....

***“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east come to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup>and asked, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’<sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, has asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup>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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.”***

If you look in the early evening sky, just before the sun fully sets, down near the southwestern horizon, you can easily see them.<sup>1</sup> Because it is the brightest, the planet Jupiter first catches your attention. Then you spot Venus, up higher to the left, and then Saturn shows up, in the middle. One evening a few weeks ago, my neighbor and I were getting out of our cars at the same time, and he looked up and saw their brightness. He said, ‘Wow! What is that!?’

If we were astronomers, we would know the stars’ patterns; we would know by their predictability, what time, what day or month it was by their place in the sky. And that is why, in the months before Jesus was born, the ‘**Magi,**’ from ‘**the East,**’ noticed that something very unusual was happening in the heavens. They saw the stars doing remarkable things; circling around the heavens in extra-ordinary patterns. (slide )

That Matthew would have included this visitation from the ‘**Magi**’ in his gospel account of the birth of Jesus is very intriguing. ‘**Magi**’ were most likely priests of the religion ‘**Zoroastrianism**’. Magi were known to practice magic and astrology, which were forbidden to Israel.

Matthew tells us that the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem took place during the rule of King Herod the Great, who is thought to have died in 4 B.C.<sup>2</sup> Because we know that Jesus was

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/night/usa/pittsburgh>

<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007),66.

born before Herod died, Jesus then, must have been born several years earlier than we commonly assume, *before* the year 1 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

Our present system of numbering the years B.C. (*'Before Christ'*) and A.D. (*which stands for Anno Domini – The Year of the Lord'*) was not set until 525 A.D. The monk seemingly made an error of a few years in his calculations.

Over the many years since Matthew wrote his gospel, there has been much speculation about the **'star'** that drew the Magi to Bethlehem. By working with the time frame given in Biblical accounts, astronomers are able to recreate the phenomenon that the Magi could have seen in the night skies over Palestine.

It is fascinating to compare all the possibilities that have been presented, but none have been proven to be *'the'* one certain explanation. Scholars have suggested that what the Magi saw could have been a comet, a super-nova or a conjunction of planets. A 'conjunction' is what happens when two or more planets appear to *'meet'* in the sky. Even though the planets are very far apart, from our viewpoint on earth, they appear to be touching one another. (slide )

After considering the options, one of the most plausible explanations is that the **'star'** of Bethlehem may be a combination of several documented conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn which occurred between 7 B.C. and 4 B.C.

The most notable are a series of rare conjunctions happened three (3) times in an 8-month period in 7 B.C. and then occurred once more, that time including Mars, in February of 6 B.C.<sup>4</sup> (slide )

The Magi were known to be *'astrologers,'* who read the stars for divine messages. So when Jupiter, which they considered to be the *'star of royalty,'* and Saturn, which they thought was the *'god'* who protected Israel, conjoined in the constellation of Pisces, which to them represented Israel, they knew something remarkable was happening!

You may remember a similar conjunction last December, in 2020, of Saturn and Jupiter, which everyone was calling, *'The Christmas Star.'* This is a slide showing the progression of that conjunction. (slide )

From the Magi's discussion with Herod, it is obvious that they interpreted whatever they saw in the sky, as a sign that a **'King of the Jews'** had been born. They called it **'His star.'** Herod, who himself was the current *'King of the Jews,'* would have been, of course, very, very alarmed at their report.

While the theories surrounding the star are fascinating, Matthew's intention was not to explain *how* the *'Star'* happened, but rather, to explain to his fellow Jews that this star signaled the arrival of God's long-awaited Messiah.

Matthew is adept at weaving Old Testament prophesy into his gospel, as he does in this passage several times.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysius\\_Exiguus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysius_Exiguus)

<https://www.space.com/14036-christmas-star-bethlehem-comet-planet-theories.html>

<sup>4</sup> Nick Strobel's Astronomy Notes. <http://www.astronomynotes.com/history/bethlehem-star/>

First, Matthew referenced **Isaiah 60**, our first reading this morning. In this reading, God told Israel, through the Prophet Isaiah, that **'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.'**

Now it is very likely that the people who followed the 'star' were not really **'kings'**, but rather, of the same profession as the **'Wise Men'** who advised the Kings of Babylon and Persia when Daniel lived there during the exile.

It's very probable that these Magi had learned from their Jewish captives about the vision Balaam had when Moses was leading Israel to the Promised Land. Do you remember Balaam, whose donkey *talked* to him to say that he wasn't moving because the road was blocked by an Angel of the LORD? (*Numbers 22:21-39*)

The LORD used this Balaam, who was a **'seer'** and **'Magi'** from another country, to prophesy that **'a star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.'** (*Numbers 24: 17*)

In our reading today from Isaiah, God promised that one day, **'Herds of camels will cover your land, ... And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.'** According to Matthew, the astrologers who came riding camels, bringing **'gold, frankincense and myrrh'** fulfilled this promise. (slide )

Even if they were not technically, **'kings,'** they must have had some sort of importance to travel so far to pay **'homage'** to a **'new king.'**

King Herod had every reason to be **'disturbed'** at the news of a royal birth. Herod had been appointed **'King of the Jews'** by the Roman Senate, Mark Antony and Caesar Augustus, through his father's political connections, not by Jewish birthright.<sup>5</sup> Here is a picture of the territory Herod was given in 37 B.C. (slide )

It is telling that Herod needed his advisors to explain the Jewish scriptures about where the **'Messiah'** was to be born. The Prophet Micah had written centuries earlier, **'Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel.'** (*Micah 5:2*)

Herod, however, *did know* enough Jewish history to know that a **'newborn'** king would not just be a **'king'** but he would be the long-awaited **'Messiah'** from God.

It is even more fascinating that Matthew, who was a Jew who wrote for a Jewish audience, would emphasize that Gentiles, like the **'Magi'** and **'all the nations'** would be welcomed into the **'light'** of God's Glory.

And that, recognizing and receiving the **'light of God,'** is the focus of Epiphany.

Epiphany marks the day when the travelers from the 'East' rejoiced at the glory of God in the little Christ child in Bethlehem. It also highlights the tragic opposite reaction from the religious leaders who refused to recognize him.

Our personal **'Epiphany'** happens at the moment we are able to grasp the truth of God and receive the salvation He has provided through His Son, Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herodian\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_Judea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herodian_Kingdom_of_Judea)  
Burgettstown Presbyterian Church

We may never know exactly how old Jesus was when the Wise Men visited. We may never know for certain what caused the bright light the Magi saw above Jesus' home. But there are things that we **can know** from Matthew's gospel and other Biblical accounts.

We can know that the Lord God intentionally reached out to the **'Magi'** from the **'East.'** Even though they worshipped different gods, the God of Israel wanted to include them in His plan.

To communicate with them, God used a language that they could understand... the stars. God still reaches out to you and me in the same way. In ways that are personal, in ways that we can understand, God still speaks to us.

The glory of God has come to us. Jesus called himself the **'bright and morning star'** (*Revelation 22:16*). Jesus is the One who shines the glory of God into our hearts. Just as the Wise Men saw the bright sign rising in the morning sky, so may we trust the **'morning star which rises'** by faith in our hearts (*1 Peter 1:19*).

In Jesus, the glory of God is now revealed. Because of Jesus, the light of God is now able to shine forth through ordinary humans. The presence of Holy God, once unapproachable, is now made personal for us.

Because Jesus has revealed God's Truth to the world, we can now know with certainty that we are known by God, valued by God and loved by God.

For those of you who are still waiting for God's **'Star'** of Truth to rise in you, I ask you to look for signs that God is reaching out to draw you in. For those of you who have lost sight of God's Light, I encourage you to keep praying and watching and trusting.

The covenant of Abraham is open to all who come to the Lord God through His Son, by the new covenant made through Jesus' great sacrifice for us.

Pray for your ears to hear God whispering your name. Pray for your eyes to see the God who created the Heavens and the Earth opening His arms to you.

Just as the kings left the comfort of their familiar lives to follow where God was leading them, we also must be willing to **'Follow His Star'** in the same way when God calls out to us.

The LORD God who made you is pleased to **'shine His glory upon all the nations,'** and upon you. Thanks be to God! Amen.