

Bethlehem Star

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[0 : 00] So in Matthew chapter 2, we see these first two opening verses. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

The days of Herod the king, this is when the wise men come to Jerusalem, and the first thing that this tells us is that the time calculations are obviously wrong somewhere along the line.

The present calendar currently used by most people throughout the world was devised by a 6th century monk called Dionysius Exiguus, meaning Dionysius the Little.

And up to that point, before he devised this new calendar that everybody now uses and counts, you know, 1970, so-and-so, 2000, whatever it is, all these numbers that we have now originated with his calculations.

Before that, the years were calculated not in BC or AD, but in AUC, that is Ab Urbe Condita, which is the dating of the establishment of the city.

[1 : 23] That's what it means from the condition, from the establishing of the city, Ab Urbe Condita. And the city in question is, of course, Rome, which was regarded as the centre of the universe by most people at that time, certainly for the first few hundred and thousand years and so on of time since Christ was born.

That is when what people regarded as the capital of everything. Now, Dionysius wrongly calculated that the year 753 AUC Ab Urbe Condita was the year of Jesus' birth.

We might call it the year dot, the dividing line between BC and AD. The problem with that is that Herod the king died in what we would now call 4 BC.

That makes it a wee bit awkward here if we're going to go by that particular calculation. And the mistake very likely stems from what we read in Luke chapter 3, where we read in verses 1 and 2, And at verse 23 of that chapter we read, Now, Luke is so precise about most of his details.

Fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, who was the high priest, who was the governor of this place and that place. When you overlap all these things together, you get quite a precise timing. Because each of them would only be in their particular office for a limited period of time.

[3 : 20] So you could really narrow it down with that. Luke is so precise in all these details because they are specific, dateable events. But the age of Jesus is not.

About 30 years of age can mean anything from about 27 to about 39. Because most people could probably tell the difference between a 26-year-old and a 40-year-old.

But that bracket in between from late 20s through to late 30s, it's not quite so easy to tell necessarily what sort of age or stage somebody is at.

Luke is so specific on so many things. You know, even if you take a little detail, like in chapter 1 of Luke's account of the gospel, where in verse 42 it says that, you know, Elizabeth sees Mary and she spake out with a loud voice and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

Now we think, okay, that's what she said. But that's not just what Luke is conveying. He's not just saying what she said. He's getting the tone and the loudness of the voice in which she said it.

[4 : 30] That's an extremely precise detail, which obviously could only have come from Mary as his source. Nobody else was there. Elizabeth presumably was dead by the time he's writing this down.

Who knows that she spoke in a loud voice or a quiet voice? Mary would know. So he's very precise about some of these details. But obviously, because he's so precise, we tend to take Luke's sort of maybe or his perhaps about 30 years old as though it were itself precise.

He's not being precise. He can't be precise. So he doesn't try to be precise. He just says about 30 years of age.

And so the calculation of the calendar is wrong because Herod still lives at this point. You know, Herod is still alive when Jesus is born.

And yet, by our calendar, that makes it about 4 BC. So he is blissfully unaware at this point when he is visited by the wise men of the potential threat to his kingdom until the wise men appear.

[5 : 41] Wise men, literally, magi is what it is in the Greek. Those who study the stars. And they arrive on the doorstep asking about a new king.

Not exactly great news for the old king. And just imagine how if somebody turned up on the doorstep and said, I'm the new minister in Scalp. Well, I would be a wee bit worried if that happens. So somebody turns up saying, where's the new king in Jerusalem? Then Herod gets naturally worried. Now, nowadays, we make a dichotomy between astronomy, that is the study of the stars, literally, the law of the stars, the orbits and plans that they follow and so on, and their movements through the sky.

And they follow mathematical patterns. Hence, astronomy, as in Deuteronomy, second law, stars law, astronomy. We make a distinction between that and astrology, which is literally words or ideas about the stars, or the ideas and studies people build up upon the movements of the stars.

We make a clear distinction nowadays between these two disciplines. The ancient world would have had no such dichotomy. The study of the stars was all one.

[7 : 01] And it was a noble discipline to many people. But charts survived from ancient China, from Greece, from Babylon. And apart from navigational purposes, obviously particularly at sea, the heavens were considered the original dwelling place of the gods.

And even for the Jews, who believed in, of course, one God only, the movement of the sun and the moon and the stars were all potentially imbued with meaning and messages for God's people.

Remember how in Revelation chapter 1 at verse 20, it said, The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.

So as far as the Jews were concerned, stars weren't just great big balls of burning gas or lumps of fire, as it were, in the heavens.

They had a spiritual implication, a spiritual meaning. So all the movements of the planets and the stars, they had special meaning. Now, the Jews, through sheer hard work and study and application, tended to rise in every profession to which they applied themselves.

[8 : 21] And so, too, in Babylon, naturally, there were Jewish exiles amongst the wise men, the magi. Daniel was full of the wisdom of the Babylonians.

He knew all their knowledge, their language, their laws, their mathematics, and so on. He was steeped in their knowledge. And doubtless there would have been others, too, who, like him, studied the different disciplines and knowledge and learning of the Babylonians.

So it is no surprise if there were Jews amongst the Babylonian wise men of the East. Not everyone came back from the exile.

A large percentage of the Jewish population, the majority of the Jewish population in exile, decided that when the opportunity came, oh, they had a pretty good life where they were.

They would just stay in Babylon, thank you very much. And others could go back to Jerusalem if they so chose. So, if, assuming there were Jewish people amongst the magi and amongst the wise men and those who studied the stars, their influence could not but have been felt in that particular discipline.

[9 : 34] In time, different stars came to be allocated different names and meanings and symbolism. Whole constellations became applicable to different nations or countries of the Earth.

Jupiter was the king of planets. Obviously, we know Jupiter is the biggest planet in our own solar system. So it was taken as being the king of planets. Pisces, the constellation, was associated particularly with the land and people of Judah.

Saturn, another planet in our solar system, of course, was taken as being the star signifying the Messiah and so on. Now, people nowadays dismiss the story of the Bethlehem star as pure myth or fantasy.

You know, how could a new star, the light of which takes millions and millions of light years to reach the Earth, suddenly appear? And if a new star was formed, or a nova, as they're called, you know,

the mass effulgence of light that suddenly exploded in the night sky would be seen by anyone all over the world.

And so it would. And somebody, somewhere in China or Greece or Babylon, in somewhere, would have written down, look, brand new star, look, appears in the sky, huge explosion of a nova.

[11 : 02] They'd have written it down in their ancient manuscripts. People would have been able to date it and to follow it and so on. But there's no record anywhere of any sighting of a new star, anywhere near the first decade BC.

And if it wasn't a new star, then how come the wise men didn't see it before this? Why are they only sort of seeing it just now?

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great. So how is it suddenly just appearing now? But, of course, the Bible doesn't say anywhere that it was a new star.

Rather, it was his star. Where is he? Verse 2, that is born king of the Jews. For we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him.

Verse 9, rather, when they heard the king, they departed. And, lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

[12 : 09] When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. It doesn't say it was a new star. You see, so much of our thinking is conditioned by the sort of pop music-y carols, you know, that surround this event, this time of year.

You know, a long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say, Mary's boy child, Jesus Christ, was born on Christmas Day. Well, of course, he wasn't. That's just the date that people have taken it as being.

While shepherds watch their flock by night, they see a bright new shining star. No, they didn't.

Shepherds didn't see the star at all. They didn't say it was a new star.

They saw the angels. Then hear a choir sing. The music seemed to come from afar. They didn't even say the angels actually sing either. If you look at what it says about the shepherds, you know, when the angels appeared to them, suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and singing, glory to God in the highest on earth, peace, goodwill toward men.

You know, it doesn't say he was born in a stable. It doesn't say it was a new star. It doesn't say the angels sang. The shepherds certainly didn't see the star. There's no mention of it whatsoever.

[13 : 23] But so much of what we think we know has been sort of rammed into our minds by the kind of pop culture that surrounds the commemoration, the commercialization of this particular event.

It is his star which they saw, the star which they saw in the east. It doesn't say it's a new star.

And certainly the shepherds didn't see it. The wise men saw it because they were looking for it.

Now, that still begs the question as to why had nobody seen it before?

Stars and planets, especially in our own solar system, move on orbits around the sun. As the moon does around the earth. Sometimes we get, for example, a solar eclipse when the moon gets in the way of the sun.

And so it blacks it out for a time. Sometimes we get a lunar eclipse when the earth gets in the way of the sun shining onto the moon. So the moon isn't able to reflect the sun's rays because the earth has got in the way of it because of the way the orbits have worked out and just the way the circular motions of how the different planets travel.

[14 : 39] Sometimes, from our earthly viewpoint, planets will pass each other on their orbits and they'll both be aligned up in the same position.

They'll be, you know, millions of miles apart from each other. But they will, from our point of view, appear to line up in the sky and appear thus to combine or to overlap.

If two stars or planets did so, the effect would be of one much bigger, much brighter star in the heavens which would last while the overlap took place and would then pass.

In other words, it would be temporary. And if it is an orbital thing, then it must, at some point, recur.

Just like the hands going round the clock. If it's ten past four, if the hands keep going round the clock, eventually it could be ten past four again. So if two planets pass each other in a certain orbit and they keep on in those orbits, then eventually, even if it's hundreds of years later, they will come back to that same point.

[15 : 49] If it is orbital, it must recur. And the German astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler, whose theories formed much of the basis for Isaac Newton's work, noticed in December

1603 that Saturn and Jupiter were each on a course to combine within the constellation now known as Pisces.

In ancient manuscripts, it had been predicted by some Jewish astrologers that when Saturn and Jupiter combined, their Messiah would come.

Now, nobody paid much attention to what these ancient Jewish astrologers had said because as far as most of the world was concerned, the Messiah had already come. The Messiah had already been.

So, you know, who's bothered about what a bunch of ancient Jewish astrologers say? We've got our Messiah. So they just ignored it. But in this late 1603, this combination, this combination, the coming together of these two planets happened again.

If it was orbital, it must have happened before. Now, Kepler's calculations and charts, checking and rechecking his figures, concluded that this had last occurred after 1603, the last previous time it had occurred, was 7 BC.

[17:18] Nobody paid much attention either when Johannes Kepler came up with this because at that time, everybody still reckoned by the calendar that Jesus was born in the year dot. It was BC up until he was born.

It was AD after that. So, as far as they were concerned, 7 BC, nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, as far as they were concerned. So they pretty much ignored it. In 1925, archaeological digs in Babylonia and the deciphering of their inscriptions of what was found confirmed that Babylonian astronomers had indeed seen and recorded the combining of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces in 7 BC.

It was observed three times in May, on the 3rd of October, and again in December of the year 7 BC, before the planets passed each other finally for the last time and then moved on.

Now, I would not be so bold as to state categorically that this was, therefore, the Bethlehem star.

Theories abound as to what the wise men were actually acting on.

Some have said that what appeared in the sky was the Shekhinah, which is the sort of Hebrew word for the glory of God that had appeared of old in the temple in the days of Solomon.

[18:43] They used to fill the temple when it was first consecrated so the priests couldn't get in and worship. What was in the tabernacle of old, this kind of appearance of the glory of God, that that was what was over Bethlehem.

That was what they were following. And some people take that as being the case, that that's the old glory of God that they were seeing. Others believe that, yes, it was a brand new star.

Others just dismiss it altogether. But astrologers or astronomers, however we describe them, in Babylonia, saw and recorded this phenomenon in 7 BC.

Wise men from the East, not kings, doesn't say they were kings, but astrologers, magi, almost certainly from Babylonia, appeared at Jesus' birth, or shortly afterwards, or at least sometime after it, on the basis of a star they had seen in the East.

That much we definitely know. People who studied the stars came from the East. Now, of course, that could mean India, it could be China, it could mean anything. It probably means Babylonia that they came from because of a star they had seen in the East.

[19:55] Now, what is so significant about Jupiter and Saturn combining in the constellation of Pisces? Now, remember what we said, Jupiter was acknowledged as the king of planets, the biggest planet in the solar system.

Saturn was taken as being the star of the Messiah. Pisces, the constellation associated with the land and people of Judah. astrologers, stargazers in the East, see this.

They see the king of planets combine in the heavens with the star of the Messiah, combining in the constellation associated with the Jewish land and people.

What did these people then put together for this? They would conclude that a new Messiah king was about to be born in the land of Judea.

Perfectly logical conclusion from what they pour into their ideas of the stars. Now, if that is the case, they want to go and check it out. They want to see if they were right, if their calculations were true and if this is indeed coming to pass.

[21:04] A new kingly Messiah of the Jews. They've got to see this. We've got to check it out. We must go and see. Where would we expect a king to be born in Judea, if not in the capital of Judea, in Jerusalem?

Now, May is too hot a month in the desert for such travel, so they probably set out in early October when the star appeared again.

Now, visible for the second time, the date of its appearing is now known to have been the 3rd of October, the Jewish Day of Atonement in that year.

Now, remember that the Atonement happened when that once a year, the 7th month, 10th day of the Jewish calendar, and the Jewish calendar did not begin in January as ours does, but rather, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23, verse 27, the 10th day of the 7th month, there shall be a Day of Atonement shall be in holy convocation unto you.

And they count their months, not from our January, but rather from the Passover. Exodus 12, verses 1 and 2, the Lord speak unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, This month shall be unto you the beginning of months.

[22 : 18] It shall be the first month of the year to you. That is the Passover time. Now, that's about our Easter, March, April sort of time. If April is your first month, six months later is your seventh month.

So, if you've got April as month number one, your seventh month then, when the atonement is? October. So, there you've got it appearing the second time to the wise man on the Day of the Atonement.

Now, is that a coincidence? Well, a skeptic will of course say, Yeah, of course it's just a coincidence. Like the person who said, No, I don't know whether my prayers get answered, or I don't know whether it's just coincidence.

All I can say for sure is, when I pray, there's an awful lot of coincidences. Now, there are no coincidences with God. Nothing is purely by chance. It is all by His providence, which He orders and directs in accordance with His perfect will.

There are no coincidences with God. How long would it take to cross the desert? How long would they spend with Herod? We do not know these things. But the last appearance of the combination of Saturn and Jupiter was 4th of December.

[23 : 36] By then, we know for sure the wise men have seen Herod. They have been told that it's not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, that they have to go, which is five miles due south of Jerusalem.

Riding from north to south, from Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, what is directly above them in the sky. But this combination, if that indeed was the Bethlehem star, this combination of the planets would be there at that time if it was the 4th of December that they were traveling on.

None of this in any way, of course, sanitizes the pagan practice of astrology and dabbling and superstitious nonsense and so on that it has become.

But it is an insult to those serious scholars and mathematicians of old to put them on a par with the tabloid horoscopes of today, which are at best stupidity and at worst superstitious and God dishonoring.

There's just no comparison at all. But we do know from Scripture that wise men, magi, astrologers, or astronomers from the East, we don't know there were three of them, we don't know how many there were, came to pay their respects to the recently born King of the Jews, the very title under which he was executed, of course, remember, the superscription that went up over his head, this is Jesus, King of the Jews.

[25 : 04] Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him. They brought gold for kingship, frankincense for prayer and worship, which was that which a priest would offer, would ascend as a cloud of incense in a time of worship, and the bitter spice of entombment, which was myrrh.

It was used in burial. We know that God used a star, a rare and temporary phenomenon in the heavens to lead them to Jesus, and why should that surprise us at the end of the day when we read Psalm 19, verse 1, that the heavens declare the glory of God.

The firmament showeth his handiwork. You know, I'm surprised Matthew didn't include that particular verse as one of his fulfilled prophecies, but prophecy was still being fulfilled.

Obviously, a prophecy of Micah, chapter 5, verse 2, But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee he shall come forth unto me.

There is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. Whoever was to be the king born in Bethlehem wouldn't just have appeared on the scene there and then.

[26 : 30] He's been from all time, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. In other words, there's effectively a prophecy that when Messiah comes, he is an eternal Messiah.

You can only be eternal, everlasting, if you are God. Only God is eternal in that sense. His goings forth have been from of old, from of everlasting.

The Messiah is going to be God personified. God, who had led them there likewise, sent them home another way, warns Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt before the bloodshed begins and prophecy kicks in again.

Hosea chapter 11, verse 1, when Israel was a child, then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt. No doubt, Joseph is unaware of all this fulfillment of prophecy as he goes along, but he acts on what God tells him.

And also, when we find here, Herod's bloodthirsty rage, although God knew what was coming, Joseph didn't know what was coming, Herod then seeks to pour out his wrath on the children of Bethlehem.

[27 : 42] And this has caused some people to think that when the wise men appeared, it was some considerable time after the incident with the shepherds. Because it says, you know, Herod wanted everyone put to death two years old and under.

Think, oh well, maybe the child was as old as two by then. Pardon me. Now, that may be the case indeed and much can be made of the fact that throughout, whenever there's any reference in Matthew, for example, when they were coming to the house, they saw the young child.

Different word translated from the Greek, young child, as opposed to, remember, what you find in Luke's account because the angel says you'll find a babe, baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

And again, verse 16, they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and a babe, a baby, lying in a manger. Different description. One is a baby, one is a young child.

How much later is that? Does it mean two years? Is that why Herod wants to kill everyone from two years old and under? Well, Herod being the sort of person he was, he would be playing safe.

[28 : 52] If the child actually was two years old, he would probably kill everyone from five years old and under just to be safe. He didn't balk at killing his wives, parents, children, anybody on a whim Herod murdered loads of people just because it took his fancy.

So, if he thought a child was two years old, he'd probably kill the five-year-olds and below. He knew for a fact the child was a boy, but he still didn't discriminate between genders.

He killed every child in Bethlehem, two years old and under. So, this is a bloodthirsty tyrant who is not fussy about who he kills just as long as he kills the one he is aiming for.

He tries to kill all the children in Bethlehem. Another prophecy fulfilled. Jeremiah 31, verse 15, Thus saith the Lord, a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel, weeping for her children, refused to be comforted for her children because they are not. Turmoil and trouble already wrought by the birth of this child.

[30 : 09] The virtuous young girl, upright young man, lives turned upside down. She ends up with child, not of her own doing in that sense.

It's from the Lord but who's going to believe that? So she is left with her reputation potentially in tatters. Joseph, upright, decent young man, his espoused wife and now there she is with child and it's definitely not his.

He's a laughing stock in the sight of the world. He either has to put her away or allow her to be put to death or take her as his wife and then suddenly he's a fool in everybody else's eyes.

His life is turned upside down. Where to stay 80 miles from home, nowhere to go. The shepherds, terrified when they see the angels and yet the sight that they see when they come to the child's crib side.

Old people in the temple, Simeon and Anna, brought within sight of the infant Messiah. Stargazers, hundreds of miles, perhaps thousands of miles away just to come and see him and they travel all that distance.

[31 : 15] The slaughter of innocents. An entire city in mourning because of the slaughter and bloodshed of all these little children.

This is no cheap, easy gift. This is no accommodation to be readily fitted into our busy existing schedule. It's no pat on the head for a hectic Christmas lifestyle.

If you will have Christ, he will turn your life upside down and demand to be the centre of all and rightly so.

He has turned everybody else's life upside down. He's already doing it at this stage in infancy. All these people's lives who have been turned around, all these people either weeping in bereavement or travelling thousands of miles or reputations seemingly in tatter or the upset to Herod and all his palace because the threat of a new king.

The whole world is in turmoil here because this one little infant child has been born. That is the effect Christ will have on any life that he enters.

[32 : 28] He will turn it upside down and he will become the centre and soul of it all if we will have them. But what a price if we do.

The life that is thus set the other way up from what we are used to becomes in fact not turned upside down but the right way up the way it was intended to be by the Lord and by his grace. when Christ is at the centre of our lives whatever the cost whatever the suffering whatever the difficulties whatever the inconvenience we will know that we have had life and life in all its fullness when we have Christ.

If we would ignore him if we would forget him then the guilt will eventually crush us just as it will crush every individual soul of the last who has turned their back upon Christ.

It will make you miserable if you shut him out because if you shut him out you must need shut yourself off and shut yourself in against all the life that is to be lived out there if only we have Christ.

[33 : 44] You must shut yourself in and shut yourself off if you would shut Christ out. You cannot try to be his equal will end up being ridiculous and foolhardy.

If we would serve him if we would obey him if we would follow him we will find that life will open up before you as the seas before the man in earth as the open countryside before the released convict.

Suddenly there is the vast expanse of life in front of you life in all its fullness life in all its promise life with Christ at the center whether it be the infant babe of Bethlehem or whether it be the ascended Christ upon the throne.

Why should we serve? Because this is what he is like. He is the servant king. Jesus said I am amongst you as one who serves and whosoever would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven must become the least as he that would serve.

This is what he is like. He is humble. He is meek. He is the babe of this whole account. He is the one whom people travel and seek and find and rejoice in.

[35 : 07] He is the one who serves meekly and humbly and is content to become helpless that he might serve the better.

This is what he is like and he wants us to be like him. Therefore if we would be great in the kingdom of heaven we must become as the least.

If we would enter the kingdom of heaven we must become as little children. if we would become his servants his children his redeemed his saved his glorified family we needs must become like him.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.