

MATT 2.1-2 THE CHALLENGE OF THE STAR

Christmas Day is a wonderful day for men and women of faith.
It is a day for celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, the Saviour of the World.

I love our Christmas morning service.
I love to sing the familiar Christmas carols.

But can we always believe what we sing?

This morning we have sung:

*“We three kings of orient are;
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star”*

Was this really so?

The honest answer is that there are aspects of this carol which are based more on imagination than on history. For this reason, this carol is not included in our hymn book, *Baptist Praise & Worship*. For instance,

- The fact that the wise men gave three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh is not proof that there were just three wise men.
- Nor is there any proof for the 7th century story that the first was Melchior, an old man with white hair and a long beard, who offered gold to the Lord as to a king; that the second, Gaspar by name, was young and beardless and ruddy complexioned, and honoured Jesus as God by his gift of incense; and that the third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, was named Balthasar, who by his gift of myrrh testified to the Son of Man who was to die”.

However, the fact that some of our Christmas carols take liberties with the Christmas story is no reason to doubt the essential truth of the Gospel stories relating to the birth of Jesus.

Take the story of the wise men. Matthew writes: **“Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the times when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him”** (Matt 2.1-2).

Although we can't prove that this story is true – there are a number of factors which together give it what J.B. Phillips used to call ‘a ring of truth’.

There is in fact nothing unreasonable about this story.

We know, for instance, that astrology was widely practised in the ancient world – especially in Babylonia and Persia. It is significant that Matthew uses the term ‘magi’, which is a technical term for learned ‘star-gazers’. I like the Hawaiian pidgin version of the New Testament calls the ‘magi’ “Da Smart Guys who know plenny bout da stars”!!

We know too that there was a widespread belief that bright new stars and conjunctions of certain constellations hailed the birth of a king.

- Tacitus, the Roman historian, wrote: “The general belief is that a comet means a change of emperor”, so “when a brilliant comet now appeared... people speculated on Nero’s successor, as though Nero were already dethroned” (Annals 14.22).
- There is a well-attested story of the Persian king and ‘magos’ Tiridates who visited Nero in AD 66 and addressed him as ‘my God Mithras’, and after offering homage returned to his country ‘by another way’.

The Christian historian Eusebius was saying nothing new when he wrote: “*In the case of remarkable & famous men we know that strange stars have appeared. What some call comets, or meteors, or tails of fire, or similar phenomena that are seen in connexion with great or unusual events*”.

We also know that the gifts brought by the wise men were just the kind of gifts that visitors from the east might bring. For gold, frankincense and myrrh were precious commodities that were traded between southern Arabia (now the Yemen) and the countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, it has been suggested that the wise men could well have stopped off at the ancient caravan city of Petra, now in southern Jordan, and bought their special gifts there.

The exact nature of the star which the wise men saw has been a matter of much speculation. One long favoured suggestion is that the wise men saw a comet. Comets move in regular but elliptical paths around the sun. When they come close to the sun and to the earth they can be striking, especially if they develop a luminous tail of gasses and dust. Remarkably bright comets appear only a few times each century.

Another suggestion is that it was a conjunction of the planets.

In the course of their orbits Jupiter and Saturn pass each other every twenty years.

A much rarer occurrence, which happens every 805 years, is when Mars passes during or shortly after the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, so that the three planets are close together.

From calculations we know that unusually there were three high points in 7BC when Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction, and that Mars passed early the next year.

Since Jupiter was deemed to be the ‘royal’ planet, and since Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the wise men might well have had reason to conclude that there was to be a new king of the Jews. This conclusion would have fitted in with an expectation which was around at that time, and which was recorded both by Suetonius and Tacitus, that a world-ruler was to come from Judea.

In preparing for today’s sermon, I read an article by Colin Humphrys, a Cambridge professor, who argues that although the scene had been set by the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC, and then the passing of Mars with Jupiter and Saturn in 6BC, the clincher was the appearance of a comet in the spring of 5BC.

This comet blazed in the area of the sky known as Capricornus – Capricornus means ‘horned goat’, and in ancient times horns symbolised power and often kings.

Interestingly the Roman Emperor August had a silver coin issued which bore the sign of Capricorn, which was where the moon stood at his birth on 23 September 63 BC.

Comets are normally only seen on one or two days. But we know from Chinese records that, unusually, this comet was visible for 70 days. If it was visible for 70 days, then this would have given the wise men time to make their journey to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem.

They would almost certainly have needed more than the traditional 12 days – we know that it took Nebuchadnezzar 23 days to make the journey from Jerusalem to Babylon..

According to Lawrence of Arabia in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a fully-laden camel can cover 100 miles if hard-pressed, and 50 miles comfortably.

If the wise men came from Babylon, then the distance between Babylon and Jerusalem going directly across the Arabian desert is 550 – on the other hand, if they travelled via the Fertile Crescent the distance would have been 900 miles.

How does all this affect the dating of the birth of Jesus?

The earliest possible date would have been the day when the comet first appeared, which according to the Chinese records was 9 March 5 BC.

This is consistent with Luke 2.8, which states that at the time of the birth of Jesus **“there were shepherds... who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks”**. Bethlehem is cold and very wet during December, January & February, so that in these months the sheep were not normally kept in the fields. They were usually put out to grass between March and November, the shepherds being with their flocks at night particularly during the spring lambing season (March –April). Jesus was therefore almost certainly a March baby.

Why then do we celebrate Christmas Day on 25 December?

Because a decision was made in 336 AD to take over the pagan feast of the ‘invincible sun’. Prior to that there was a tradition of celebrating the birth of Jesus on January 6, but even that date was a taking over of another pagan festival.

Incidentally, there is no reason to get upset that the birth of Jesus took place five years ‘BC’. It has been long known that the division of time between BC & AD was based upon a miscalculation of the birth of Jesus by Dionysius the Small in AD 525.

Matthew sets the date of the wise men’s visit **“in the time of King Herod”** (2.1).

Herod the Great reigned from 37 – 4 BC. Jesus clearly was born before 4 BC.

A date of spring 5BC would therefore fit.

But all these mistakes of dating do not undermine the historicity of the Biblical record.

The Gospels themselves do not state that Jesus was born on 25 December 0 BC/AD!

In fact the Biblical record is quite consistent with what we know of wise men, and what we know of the timing of the star.

But ultimately the issue is not when Jesus was born, but rather who this Jesus was.

The challenge of the star lies not in the star itself, but rather in the one to whom the star points.

The challenge of the star is a challenge to think seriously about Jesus.

The ‘magi’ were wise men who thought seriously about Jesus.

The conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 7 BC, the massing of Mars with these 2 planets in 6 BC, & the appearance of the comet in 5 BC, caused them to ponder and to think.

Their decision to follow the star was not based on a whim, but involved the use of reason.

Similarly, following Jesus today, involves the use of reason.

Yes, it involves faith, but it is not mindless faith.

In this respect the humanist group were mistaken, who at the time of a university Christian mission circulated posters saying, ‘Join the Christian Union now. Entrance fee: your critical faculty and personal independence’.
That’s rubbish. Following Jesus does not involve the loss of one’s critical faculty. Indeed, Jesus quoted the OT Scripture which says that we should love the Lord our god not just with our hearts, but also with our minds.

The fact is that Christian faith does not fly in the face of all human reason. In the words of Pope John II’s 1998 encyclical letter ‘Fides et Ratio’ (“Faith and Reason”): “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves”.

My friends, we can with confidence sing our Christmas carols. What’s more, unlike our previous carol, in which imagination was allowed room, our final carol contains solid truth.

*True God of God
Light from light eternal
Maiden for mother, he was born for us all;
Only begotten
Son of God the Father*

This is not make-believe. This is the true wonder of the Christmas story. Yes, in a way which we cannot understand: “The word of the Father appeared in [human] flesh”.

*O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord!*