

“Star of Wonder”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

A Reflection for the Epiphany of Jesus using the carol, “We Three Kings”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2019

Please click [here](#) to read the Scripture.

On a clear and moonless night, far from lights of cities and towns, we, with average eyes, can see about 2–3,000 stars in the sky. Good eyes can see maybe 5,000.¹ Sure, among the septillion or so stars our best telescopes can now image, 5,000 is a teeny number.² Still, it is enough to dazzle us, fill us with wonder, set us off on searches.

Among them, God placed one singular speck of light that mattered most to those “wise men.”

Maybe God knew they would be looking for it?

II

Of course we’ll be singing “We Three Kings.”

We imagine the scene: the “three kings” arranged with the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth. More likely they got there months later. Jesus might have been a toddler. We mark their arrival at Epiphany, after the Christmas season.

The Bible says there were three gifts, but not how many “kings.” There might have been two, twelve, twenty, or three. We don’t know. I doubt the number matters.

The song says they were from the Orient. Orient just means “east.” It’s not helpful for naming a place or people. It’s just a direction.³ The Bible says they came from where the sun rises, eastward.⁴

What the Bible does not say is that they were kings. It calls them nothing of the sort, though that idea goes way back. The Bible calls them “magi.”

III

¹ Bob King, “9,096 Stars in the Sky—Is That All?” Skyandtelescope.com. (September 17, 2004). www.skyandtelescope.com/astronomy-resources/how-many-stars-night-sky-09172014.

The 9,096 number is a calculation of what can be seen by the naked eye from the whole earth. Yet a person can only see the half of the sky above their horizon.

² Megan Garber, “How Many Stars Are There in the Sky?” TheAtlantic.com (November 19, 2003) www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/11/how-many-stars-are-there-in-the-sky/281641

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orient>

⁴ The Greek word anatolé means “a rising.”

This strange term reminds us how strange it was for them to show up in Jesus' story.

Magi were scholars.⁵ They were "wise," though not necessarily just men.⁶ They could have been from where we find Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Iraq, or Iran today.⁷ Wherever they started, theirs was a journey of many, many weeks. Strange for them to travel so far to see Jesus.

Magi were not Jews, not part of God's People. They were Zoroastrians. That's one of the oldest religions in the world.⁸ Before Islam, Zoroastrianism had been the main religion in the whole area. Strange for Zoroastrians to honour a Jewish messiah.⁹

Most strange . . . they followed stars.

Magi studied the "laws" of the night sky: constellations, orbits, convergences and patterns. They believed that what happens "up there" is bound with what happens "down here." Something big happens on earth, and the stars show it. See something strange in the sky, and you know something extraordinary will happen on the ground.¹⁰ Magi were astrologers, looking for the "message" of the stars.¹¹

To people of the Bible, this was craziness and worse.¹² The prophet Isaiah said:

*You have more than enough advisers, astrologers, and stargazers. Let them stand up and save you from what the future holds. But they are as useless as dried grass burning in a fire.*¹³

Useless, and worse. Astrology turns us away from God. Instead, we trust things God has made, gas balls that have no power over us. Looking to them for help is a delusion. Looking away from God is disaster.

⁵ Raymond Brown The Birth of the Messiah (New York: Doubleday, 1977) and R. T. French Matthew (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985).

⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/feb/10/matthewtaylor>, revgeary.wordpress.com/2018/01/09/the-women-magi-who-visited-jesus/, and www.ncronline.org/blogs/simply-spirit/epiphany-wise-women

⁷ The Zoroastrian religion was spread throughout the area by the Achaemenid Empire and others.

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism>

⁹ Messiah means "king." Communities of Jews lived throughout the region. Perhaps some magi knew of their traditions about the coming Messiah.

¹⁰ Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone: Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 10.

¹¹ "Astronomy" literally means "laws of the stars" and astrology, "words of the stars."

¹² No doubt, some in Israel did practice astrology. Idolatry has always been a persistent temptation for God's people.

¹³ Isaiah 47:13-14a. (New Living Translation)

IV

So biblical faith rejects astrology. Now ponder this surprise: God used the magi's astrology to bring them to Jesus.

What do we make of this star? The idea of an enormous object, light years away, scooting around the sky like a firefly to keep some earth-bound travellers on track stretches the imagination. Possible? Hey, this is God's show! Other theories abound. Was it a comet? Or a supernova?

Here's one that intrigues me. In ancient astrology, Jupiter was the planet for kings, and Saturn the planet for the Jews. They never come together, except every 973 years when, 3 times over a few months, the light from King-planet-Jupiter and Israel-planet-Saturn overlaps: King of the Jews! This once-in-a-millennium convergence happened shortly before Jesus was born.¹⁴ Maybe?

Whatever it was, something sent those magi on that long journey to find a newborn king.¹⁵ God used their astrology to start them searching for Jesus.

They were not looking for God, but God placed a clue where they were looking: the night sky. A shimmer among thousands, unnoticeable . . . except to those who were paying close attention. For them, God seems to have made a display.

V

Consider this. What are some of the first words we learn? "Not fair!" Injustice is not of God. It can make us doubt God. Or, in it's midst God might be giving us a strong sense that things should not be this way. But to have a meaning, a "should," there must be a Maker. Our ache for justice might be a "star of wonder," leading us to God.

Consider this. Death is a dreadful disruption. It robs us of God's gift of life, severs us from those who God made us to love, leaving us broken in grief that God shares. Death is an enemy. It might crush us. Or, in the midst of our sorrow and fear, God might show us that God made us for life, and promises eternity. Our pain at death might be a "star of wonder," leading us to God.

Consider this. We are wired for relationships. Whether the intimate relationship of a couple, the bond between parent and child, or broader relationships of neighbourhoods, villages, communities and even nations, we are social animals. Yet we know how these vital relationships are so often centres of pain, disappointment, betrayal, hatred, and even

¹⁴ See Phil Greetham, "The Theories" (updated 2012) www.greetham.me.uk/nativity/theory.html.

¹⁵ Of course, all this assumes Matthew's account is credible. While most scholars find it dubious, I am more willing to trust it. Besides my general trust in Scripture, I am left wondering why the very Jewish Matthew, writing apparently for very Jewish Christians, would invent a story involving astrology when it was so widely disdained in Judaism.

violence. Hearts become stone, stone that easily breaks. In this midst of this, God might show us the ways of reconciliation — forgiveness, repentance and making things right. The way of love: for friend, for neighbour, for enemy. God's love for us, we who break relationships. Broken hearts might be a "star of wonder," leading us to God.

God can be using these things and others, realities of life that are not of God to start us searching for God. God used the magi's ungodly astrology to get them going.

It was only a start. The star only took them so far. To find Jesus, they needed God's Word in Scripture (Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem). God uses the Bible, and other people, and the church community to bring us closer to Jesus.

VI

Epiphany is this season when we celebrate God's unveiling of who Jesus is. So we hear of these magi —from exotic places far away, a faith tradition outside of God's People, a profession and view of the cosmos that was repugnant to the ways of God. To these magi, God gives a sign, a pointer, a clue exactly where they would be looking.

These magi become a symbol, then, that God breaks through barriers, steps across boundaries, ignores walls of languages, cultures, religions, or fear, to make the way for us when there would seem to be no way.

God makes a way for us to Jesus. To see the Messiah, the finally new and everlasting sovereign for God's People. To see God-in-person, the divine Word become human flesh and baby, God who is with us and for us, God who loves us.

God wants us and everyone to see him, to know him, to revere him, to love him, so we can be alive in his love for you, and me, and all.

As we sing "We Three Kings," sure there are some things that are not so accurate. But the most important are: the star of wonder, and the one to whom the star brings the magi and us too.

What flicker of light, what star of wonder, God is showing you?

How will you follow it where God is leading you?