

## The Christmas Star

### The Christmas Star<sup>1</sup>

Matt. 2:1-10 records that when our Lord was born, wise men from the east followed a star in the heavens to come worship him. Today we consider three questions about this history.<sup>2</sup>

1. Who are they?
2. How did they know that a star would mark the coming of Israel's king?
3. Why did they bother to come?

### Who Are the Wise Men?

Some of our Christmas carols call them “kings,” but the text does not assign them that role.<sup>3</sup> The Greek text calls them *μαγοι*, which is sometimes translated into English as “magi.” This is the word from which we get our word “magic.”

The term appears in the LXX in Daniel 2:2,10,<sup>4</sup> to describe the court astrologers of Nebuchadnezzar (chart):

Dan 2:2 Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the **astrologers**, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king.

Dan 2:10 The Chaldeans answered before the king, and said, There is not a man upon the earth that can shew the king's matter: therefore *there is* no king, lord, nor ruler, *that* asked such things at any magician, or **astrologer**, or Chaldean.

Our version, and some modern translations (the NET Bible), describe them as astrologers. The Aramaic word is more generic, and can refer to an enchanter or other master of arcane knowledge. But we know that the Babylonians were ardent students of the heavens.<sup>5</sup> If astrology was not their specialty, it certainly fell within their scope of interest.

The bottom line is that they were court advisors, the scholars of their day, from the area of present-day Iraq.

### How did they Know about the Star?

The short answer is, “We don't know.” The record does not tell us. We can, though, make a reasonable

- 1 A version of this study was presented on 20 December 1986.
- 2 Astronomers have devoted considerable energy to a fourth question: just what was it that they saw? There are several candidates in the realm of natural phenomena, as well as the possibility that God provided a special apparition that only these men saw. We will not discuss that question here.
- 3 The royal title may have been assigned based on a view that their coming fulfills Isa 60, which says that in the coming kingdom, Gentiles will bring “gold and incense” (v. 6). Four times, this chapter anticipates the coming of kings to celebrate Zion's restoration (vv. 3, 10, 11, 16).
- 4 The Aramaic term is *ܡܫܝܚܐ*. It also occurs in 1:20; 2:27; 4:7; 5:7, 11, 15, where Theodotion's version uses the term, but the standard LXX either uses a more general word for wise man, or appears to follow a different text. Josephus (Antiquities 10, 195-236) repeatedly uses the word to describe the court wise men of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.
- 5 Otto Neugebauer, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Dover, 1969, chapter 5, “Babylonian Astronomy.”

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guess on the basis of the OT. The argument has two parts. The first is that the OT describes the coming of the Messiah in astronomical language, and the second is that the OT was known in the land from which the wise men came.

### ***OT Astronomical References to the Messiah***

The most direct reference is in Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24, but the coming of the Messiah is described in astronomical terms elsewhere as well.

### **Balaam's Prophecy, Num. 24:15-19**

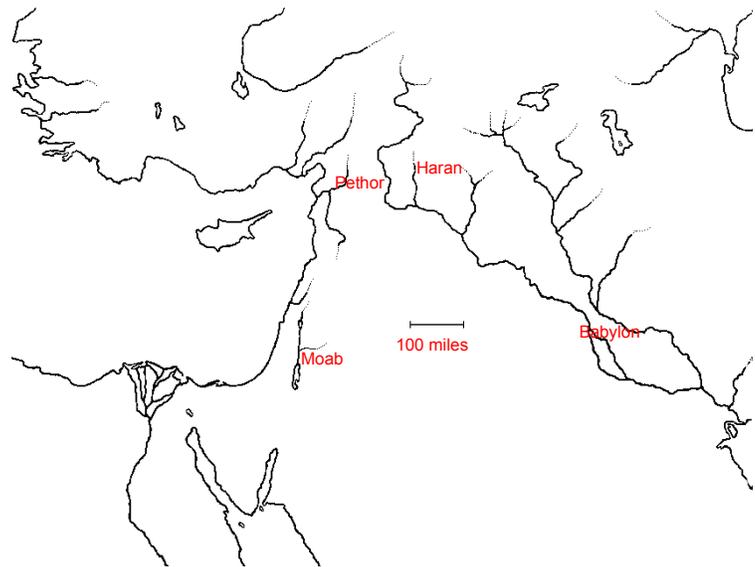
Numbers 23-24 describes an event that happens about 1400 BC, after Israel has finished her 40 years march through the wilderness, and is encamped in the plains of Moab, the wide flat area north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan. Balak, the king of Moab, feels threatened by this mass of people. We can imagine his fear when we consider the impact that the refugees from the Middle East are having on nations in our day.

The most formidable weapons in the mind of Balak were spiritual in nature. He wants to bring a curse on Israel, and he identifies Balaam as the expert he wants to hire. To counter the threat, he sends for a soothsayer from Pethor.

Pethor, according to Num 22:5, is by the Euphrates, and is best identified with a location called Pitru mentioned in old Assyrian records, about 12 miles south of Carchemish (chart, Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Why should he send so far away (400 miles, or at least 20 days, according to Milgrom on Numbers)?

Pethor is near Haran, where Terah the father of Abraham died, and the home of Rachel and Rebecca, the wives of Isaac and Jacob. We know from their history that Laban and Bethuel, their brother and father, knew God by the name Yahweh, and so does Balaam, who uses the name in his prophecies. Balak apparently knows something of the origin of the nation, and wants to hire a specialist, a sorcerer who can invoke their own deity against them.

Balaam delivers four prophecies. In spite of his covetous heart and wicked intent, Balaam is unable to deliver the curse Balak desires, but instead blesses Israel four times (chart).



*Figure 1: Map of the Middle East*

<sup>6</sup> W. Shea, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27:2 (1989) 97-119, suggests an alternative location at modern Deir Alla on the Jordan river between Jericho and the Sea of Galilee, but the Jordan is not usually called simply "the river," as is the Euphrates, the term used in Num 22:5.

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- In 23:7-10, he sees Israel as separated from the other nations.
- In 23:18-24, he describes Israel's immunity to being cursed.
- In 24:3-9, he anticipates their prosperity.
- In 24:15-24, he predicts the defeat of their enemies, including Moab, whose king has hired him to curse them.

The fourth prophecy is the one that interests us.

Num 24:17 I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. 18 And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly. 19 Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city.

The Jews understood this prophecy messianically.<sup>7</sup> Balaam is not making it up from scratch, but appears to know of Jacob's blessing on his sons in Genesis 49. Jacob blesses Judah:

Gen 49:10 The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him *shall* the gathering of the peoples *be*.

The word "people" in our version should be plural. Jacob foretold that Judah would exercise rule, not just over Israel, but over other nations as well, a theme that Balaam picks up. In vv. 17 and 19, Balaam refers to the promised lawgiver who will hold the sceptre, and describes him as a rising star. It is important to note that the prophecy emphasizes coming judgment on the other nations, a detail that understandably upsets Balak.

## Later Prophecies

Balaam's prophecy clearly anticipates the coming Messiah, the one Jacob calls Shiloh, under the figure of a star. This image is seen later in the prophets as well. Around 700 BC, Isaiah prophesies,

Isa 60:1 Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is **risen** upon thee. 2 For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. 3 And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy **rising**.

The verb "risen" describes the rising of a heavenly body such as the sun or a star. Here, it is the glory of the Lord that rises over Jerusalem.

After the exile, Malachi (about 400 BC) describes the coming of the Messiah in similar terms:

Mal 4:2 But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness **arise** with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

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<sup>7</sup> "In Num. 24:17 Balaam's prediction of the Star and Sceptre is referred to the Messiah in the Targum Onkelos and the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, as well as in Jer. Taan. 4. 8; Deb. R. 1; Midr. on Lament. 2:2." Edersheim, A. (1896). *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Vol. 2, p. 714). New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

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So there is a consistent teaching throughout the OT associating the coming of the promised Messiah, the seed of the woman, with celestial signs. God declared in Gen 1:14 that the heavenly bodies would be “for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years,” and it is reasonable that he would mark the new age of Messiah’s reign with such a sign.

### ***How did the Wise Men learn of these prophecies?***

Now we have to ask how the wise men would have learned of these prophecies. Remember that God sent both the northern and the southern kingdoms into captivity in Mesopotamia (2 Kings 17:6, 2 Kings 25:8-11). Judah in particular was taken to Babylon, and two of the captives, Ezekiel and Daniel, have left us important books. Their works show us that while the captivity as a whole was punishment to the nation for its apostasy, not all who went into captivity were apostates. These were devout men, who carried the knowledge of God. In Daniel in particular, we see a strong testimony in the highest levels of the kingdom.

Two things are apparent about Daniel.

First, he knows the OT Scriptures. Daniel 1 shows his familiarity with the dietary laws, and Daniel 9 shows that he has access to the prophecies of Jeremiah

Dan 9:2 In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

So it seems clear that the Jews took their scrolls with them to Babylon at the time of the captivity, and that later books (such as Jeremiah) also made their way there.

Second, God advanced him to a position of prominence among the wise men.

In Dan 1, he and his Jewish colleagues gain a reputation among the wise men:

Dan 1:18 Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king. 20 And in all matters of wisdom *and* understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians *and* astrologers that *were* in all his realm.

In Dan 2, after revealing Nebuchadnezzar’s “forgotten” dream, the king promotes him to a position of official preeminence:

Dan 2:48 Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise *men* of Babylon.

When Daniel successfully interpreted the writing on the wall, he was advanced to the third place in the kingdom, after Belshazzar, who was second to Nabonidus, who was absent from the capital:

Dan 5:29 Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and *put* a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be the third ruler

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in the kingdom.

When Cyrus conquered the city and put Darius in charge, Daniel was placed at the head of advisors:

Dan 6:1 It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; 2 And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel *was* first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. 3 Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit *was* in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm.

Now put these two observations together. Daniel's prominence as the head of the wise men, the magi, of his day, means that the wise men in Matthew 2 may well have honored his memory. And the Scriptures that he treasured would remain important volumes in their library, as well as being maintained by the Jewish community that remained in the area of modern Iraq and Iran after the restoration.

Whether we understand them as astrologers or just as wise men, they would be fascinated with astronomical phenomena. When the star appears, they would notice it and seek to explain it. They rack their brains, search their libraries--and come up with Balaam's prophecy.

### Why did they Bother to Come?

This is the most fascinating question of all.

They did not come out of curiosity, or in fulfillment of a casual diplomatic protocol. The birth of a king here is not a matter of great import, as the world sees things. Judea is a minor kingdom at this time, a puppet of the Roman empire.

We can only assume that they believed the substance of Balaam's prophecy, that this coming king would subdue all his enemies. If they indeed remember Daniel and his prophecies, they would recall Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue crushed by the little stone in ch. 2, or the wild beasts subdued by one like a son of man in ch. 7. The Spirit of God opens their hearts to understand his word, and "moved with fear" like Noah, they hasten to embrace the promised Messiah.

They are thus the firstfruits of the Gentile harvest promised in Isa. 60, emerging in the church, and to be completed in the coming kingdom. Recall again Isaiah's use of astronomical language in describing the coming kingdom:

Isa 60:1 Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. 2 For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. 3 And **the Gentiles shall come to thy light**, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew emphasizes the inclusion of Gentiles in the church, and the history of the wise men is thus particularly important to him.

### Lessons

There are several lessons we should draw from the history of the Christmas star.

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1. A wicked prophet can give a true message. We learn later that he found other ways to help Balak attack Israel (Num 31:16; Rev 2:14), but in these prophecies he spoke truly. Even Caiaphas, while plotting to destroy our Lord, stated truly that he would die for the nation (John 11:50). Our Savior has taught us that words alone are not enough to distinguish a true prophet from a false prophet: “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16).
2. God causes the wrath of man to praise him (Psa 76:10). There are two instances of this in our history.
  - (a) Balak sought to harm Israel, but through his interference, God gave a wonderful promise concerning the Messiah.
  - (b) The captivity was a terrible disaster for Israel, and hardly a pleasant experience for Daniel.<sup>8</sup> But through him and other captives, a detailed knowledge of God’s word came among the people of Babylon.<sup>9</sup>
3. God does his work through the power of his word.
  - (a) Balaam knew Jacob's prophecy, and enriched it.
  - (b) The Jews brought Balaam’s prophecy to Mesopotamia in their captivity.
  - (c) There the Magi found in it an explanation of strange happenings in the skies, and through it the HS moved them to come and worship.

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<sup>8</sup> The palace official who was responsible for him was the “master of the eunuchs,” Dan 1:3. It is likely that Daniel was not only taken captive, but also made a eunuch, as Isaiah anticipated in his warning to Hezekiah in 2Ki 20:18, “And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

<sup>9</sup> Compare the effect of the persecution suffered by the early church, Acts 8:1-4, which led to the establishment of the church in Antioch, Acts 11:19-21.