

Understanding the Star of Bethlehem

By Jimmy Akin



The Star of Bethlehem is endlessly fascinating. All kinds of theories about what it was have been proposed.

One set of theories holds that the Star of Bethlehem was a providentially timed astronomical phenomenon of a type that we are familiar with—such as a star, conjunction, supernova, or comet.

We will call these “Type A” theories.

However, there are also what we might call “Type B” theories. Based on the way Matthew describes the star, some have thought it was fundamentally different than any of the known astronomical phenomena.

For example, some have thought it was a supernatural manifestation that led the magi around.

Some have even suggested it was a flying saucer—or that it was a myth and never really existed.

All of these views are based on the idea that the star didn’t move the way a normal star would.

The subject of the Star of Bethlehem is too complex to cover in its entirety here, but I’d like to look at several reasons why the Bible does *not* require that we explain the star in terms of a Type B theory.

The texts allow us to see it as a more familiar astronomical phenomenon—although one providentially timed by God to signal the birth of his Son.

1) Why would people think the star’s motion was unusual?

There is a popular impression that the magi began following the star in their eastern homeland and that it led them to Jerusalem. This is taken to mean that the star moved from east to west.

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From Jerusalem, the magi go to Bethlehem, which is south of Jerusalem.

Then, according to this impression, the star stops and hovers over the house where Jesus was residing.

The star is thus taken to move from east to west, turn south, and then hover.

That makes it sound like a light in the sky that can't be a star.

However, this account is mistaken.

2) Why is it mistaken?

This view begins to go wrong because of the assumption that the magi were *following* the star, but that's not what Matthew says.

Let's look at what he does say:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him" [Matthew 2:1-2].

The phrase "in the East" is ambiguous. It might mean that they were in the East when they saw it (they were from the East, after all), or it may mean that they saw it when it rose over the eastern horizon.

Except for the stars that never set, stars rise over the eastern horizon and set below the western horizon, just like the sun does.

Either way, this does not tell us much, because the event occurred between one and two years earlier, based on the time they tell Herod (see Matthew 2:16).

The apparent position of the star would have changed radically over that time, as almost all stars do as the earth orbits the sun.

In any event, Matthew does not say that the magi were following the star. He does not say that it led them to Jerusalem. Instead, he suggests something else.

3) What does he say that suggests they weren't just following the star?

It's the fact that they ask *where* the King of the Jews has been born.

If the star were leading them around by the nose, as it were, then they wouldn't have had to ask this question. They would have just waited until nightfall and then continued following the star until it led them to the newborn king.

Thus, we have no indication that they followed the star from their homeland in the East to Jerusalem.

Instead, they saw the star from their homeland, realized that it implied the birth of a new king for the Jews, and then went to the royal palace in Jerusalem, where you might expect to find the newborn king.

After a consultation, Herod tells them that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, and they set out again.

But even here, Matthew does not say they were following the star.

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4) What does he say?

He states:

When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy [Matthew 2:9-10].

So after they leave King Herod, they see the star again. Matthew introduces this by saying “lo” (i.e., “behold!”), indicating something remarkable or surprising.

The fact that they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” also suggests that they weren’t following the star. It was a remarkable and joyous (and providential) coincidence that the star was in front of them when night fell again.

So it wasn’t that they were following the star. They had stopped to *ask* where they should go, they were told Bethlehem, and then *as they were going to Bethlehem* they were surprised and joyous to see the same star in front of them.

This was a providential coincidence, but they would have gone to Bethlehem, even if they had not seen the star in front of them, because that’s where they were told to go.

5) Does the fact that the star “went before them” indicate unusual motion on the star’s part?

No. It simply means that the star remained in front of them during the short trip to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is only six miles from Jerusalem, and since the star was in front of them when they began the six mile ride, it remained in the same general part of the sky during the short trip.

6) Does the fact that the star “came to rest over the place where the child was” indicate unusual motion?

No, but the English translation here (the RSV) is a misleading one.

Saying that it “came to rest” suggests that it stopped moving and started resting. That could suggest unusual motion for a star.

But what the Greek says would be better translated “until it came and stood” or “until it came to stand” over the place.

This just means that, when they drew near at the house, the magi observed that this star appeared to be above the house in the sky—as numerous other stars would have as well.

This does not mean that this star or the others above the house froze in their motions, only that this was where they were in the sky as the magi approached the dwelling.

It’s another providential coincidence, but it does not indicate unusual motion (or lack of motion) on the part of the star.

7) So we don’t have an indication that the star moved in an abnormal manner?

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No. The magi were not following it as it zigged and zagged in the sky. In fact, it did not zig and zag in the sky.

So far as we know, the star moved in the entirely normal (and *slow*) way that stars do.

It was simply a providential coincidence that, as the magi were on their way to Bethlehem they saw the star in front of them, that it stayed generally in front of them as they journeyed the six miles, and—when they neared the house—was in the part of the sky that was over the house where Jesus was.

8) After noting that it was before them when they began their journey, and that it continued to remain before them as they went, could they have used the star to indicate which house in Bethlehem they should check?

This is possible, but they also could have asked if any local families of the line of David had a child of the right age and then noted, upon going to that house, that the star was above it.

This does not tell us what the Star of Bethlehem was (that's a subject for another time), but it does mean that we can't rule out the idea that it was a familiar-but-providential astronomical phenomenon.

Indeed, the fact that Matthew uses the word "star" (Greek, *astēr*) to describe it should point us toward it being the kind of thing that the original audience would have understood this term to refer to—i.e., one of the more familiar astronomical phenomena.

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