

Matthew 2:9

RETHINKING THE STORY OF THE MAGI

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Explanations of the Star of Bethlehem rise and fall based on the following text in Matthew 2:9:

“After hearing the king, they went their way; and behold the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until having arrived, it stood over the place where the Child was.”

This passage has been interpreted to mean that the star went visually in front of the wise men from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The Eastern Church Fathers thought that the wise men had visually followed the star all the way from the east to Judaea and then on to Bethlehem. However, the usual ideas about the text may not be what Matthew had in mind. In fact, the traditional interpretation of the text of the star as a visual guide may be profoundly in error.

While ancient astronomers might have used the stars to get their bearings, none of them would have even dreamed of trying to follow a real heavenly object visually. Stars rise in the east and set in the west like the sun and moon (Exceptions: Mercury and Venus look like stars to the naked eye, and they do sometimes make their appearance in the western sky in the evening). It is impossible to try to follow the sun, moon, or stars visually as they traverse the sky in the manner usually associated with the Magi.

There are some other serious problems and assumptions connected to the traditional view of the story. We are usually not told how the men could see the road to follow a star visually at night. The Greek fathers speculated that the men followed the star during the daytime. Therefore that was not a problem for them. The traditional view does not tell us how the wisdom of the Magi was related to the star, nor does it explain how the men

came to associate any star with Israel’s Messiah. As well, some people speculate that the star was invisible to all others except the Magi. Otherwise, it would have been followed visually by hundreds if not thousands of people. The traditional idea of a star giving visual guidance is fairly mystical. No ancient astronomer had the habit of visually following stars. However, it is affirmed almost everywhere in Christian circles that the traditional understanding of the text is the only one which is possible. When Matthew wrote his account, he may have had a different idea in mind concerning the star. This short paper will propose an entirely different understanding of the star, not as a guide, but as a sign.

A Different Way of Thinking About Matthew 2:9

One way of understanding Matthew’s text would be to look at other passages in Matthew, which use the same keywords. Matthew uses the Greek verb, προάγω (proa-go), meaning “to precede / to go ahead of,” in other passages in Matthew’s Gospel. In Chapter 14:22-25 we read:

“Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead (προάγειν) of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But the boat was already a

Below: The Greek words: “the star which they had seen in the east...”

ὁ ἀστήρ ὃν εἶδον
ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ



Image: John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407) was one of the great preachers of his age. He speculated that the star was an angel who went ahead of the magi, visually leading the wise men to the exact spot where the young child was located. Chrysostom believed the star went ahead of the Magi visually during the daytime, not at night. The ancients realized that one could not travel at night. It would have largely been impossible to see the road, except on moonlit nights.

long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea.” (See also the parallel passage in Mark 6:45.)

Jesus sent the disciples “on ahead” of him. However, he did not follow their boat as if he were following a beacon or guide. Jesus went in a different direction up onto a mountain. He only arrived at the boat much later. In this text, the verb “proago” is used to indicate that the disciples were on their way to a particular place. Later Jesus eventually met them on the lake. The disciples were in the process of “going on ahead” of Jesus to another destination.

During the last supper, Jesus made the following statement: “*But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you (προάξω) to Galilee*” (Matthew 26:32, see also Mark 14:28). After Jesus was raised from the dead, an angel appeared to some of his followers and said to them: “*Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you (προάγει) into Galilee, there you will see Him...*” (Matthew 28:7, see also Mark 16:7).

It is clear that the disciples did not follow Jesus visually to Galilee in the same sense that one usually thinks about the wise men following the star. Jesus indicated that after his resurrection he was going to arrive in Gal-

ilee ahead of the disciples. On their way to Galilee, the disciples were not taking visual and directional guidance from Jesus. The disciples arrived chronologically in Galilee after Jesus already had arrived there. Jesus had “preceded” them there.

In Matthew 21:9, during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we read ... *the crowds that went before (προάγοντες) him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”* The atheist Aaron Adair, in his book seeking to debunk the star story, insists that this passage means that the crowd was leading Jesus in order to say that Matthew 2:9 also means the same thing (Adair, 2013, Chapter 7).¹ However, in this case, Jesus was not being guided or looking to the crowd for guidance, he was simply entering the city while some people preceded him. Jesus knew the way to the city gate, and the crowd did as well. They were all on the road together. The crowd was indicating very clearly that they were accompanying the Messiah, not guiding him. They were welcoming him into the city. (See also the parallel passage in Mark 11:9.)

¹ Adair, Aaron. 2013. *The Star of Bethlehem: A Sceptical View*. N.P.: Onus Books.

*Matthew did not refer to the star as an object
that gave directional guidance,
but rather as a sign
that announced the coming of the Messiah.*

In the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:31, which follows the triumphal entry, Jesus speaks of “*the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into (προάγουσιν) the kingdom of God before*” the chief priests and elders who are questioning him. The verb is in the third person plural, present, indicative, active, indicating they were at that time “entering into the kingdom.” Here Jesus is not suggesting that the tax collectors and prostitutes serve as guides visibly going on ahead of the others. He is saying that they are chronologically entering the kingdom in advance of the rulers, who themselves may not enter in at all. Jesus’ next statement underlines this, “*For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*”

In addition, in the book of Acts the verb προάγω (pro-ago) is used in 12:6, 16:30, 17:5 and 25:26 in the sense of bringing or leading someone out before authorities in legal proceedings/investigations. All these passages use the verb proago, but in the specific context involving prisoners being brought or led out before authorities. In each case, the verb usage is different from considering the star as a visual guide that supposedly led the Magi.

From the preceding paragraphs, it becomes evident that the traditional view of assuming that the star was a visual guide that led the Magi directly to the messianic child in Bethlehem is very questionable on exegetical grounds. None of the other passages in Matthew’s Gospel, which use the verb “to go before / to precede,” carry a meaning of someone or something going on in advance as a guide, visually leading someone else to a destination. In both Gospel of Matthew and Mark, the verb “proago” is used to refer to someone arriving at a place chronologically before someone else would arrive there. The idea of leading or guiding is not at all present.

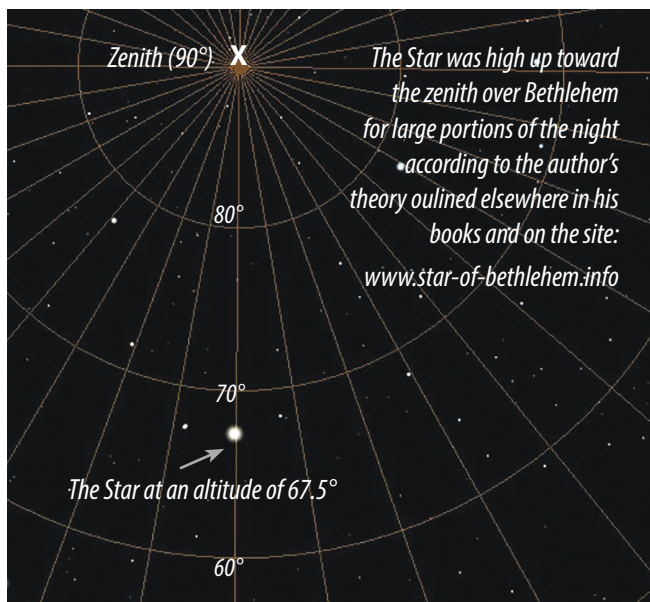
An Alternate Interpretation of Matthew’s Account

In various versions of the Bible and the original text we read: “And behold, the star, which the men had seen in the east.” The words used in the text, και ιδου (and behold), are the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word “hinneh.” This manner of writing is sometimes used to indicate a change of subject, perspective or to emphasize a point. Matthew uses this phrase “and behold” repeatedly in his gospel (see 3:16; 4:11; 8:2, 24, 29, 32, 34; 9:2f, 20; among other passages). When the phrase is used the subject or idea that is introduced may or may not have any direct connection with the previous text. While some versions of Matthew’s text skip over these words, they may be important.

The words, “*And behold the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them,*” are not referring to the star going before as a visual guide between Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Rather, the phrase is designed to send the

Below: The edge of Bethlehem generally looking toward the traditional site of the shepherd’s field.





reader back several months in the past to the former situation in the east. Matthew was seeking to relate the Magi's experience in the east to their later experience in Judaea. In the east the star had been a sign concerning the Messiah. Later it also became a sign over Bethlehem.

It was "from the east" that the star "went on ahead of the Magi." The star "preceded" the men to the skies above Judaea from where the Magi had been before. They had been in the eastern lands, most likely in Babylonia in modern Iraq. The eastern Church Fathers thought that the star went visually on ahead of the wise men from the east. However, the text does not say that the star went visually ahead of the wise men. Matthew apparently was not indicating anything about the star going ahead of the men as a directional guide. Rather, the star was simply waiting for the men when they arrived at Bethlehem itself, having "preceded" them there. It was in Bethlehem itself (not on the way there) that the men had a new experience with the star, when it was over the place where the child was located.

In Matthew 2:9, the star "went before" until "having arrived," "it stood." The imperfect "went before" took place previous to the two aorist verbs "having arrived" and "it stood," both of which indicate completed action in past time. Following the order of events in the text, the Magi's renewed "seeing" of the star in Matthew 2:10 may have happened only after the men had already arrived in Bethlehem itself. If one reads the text in this way, Matthew was just affirming that the star, which previously had been seen in the east, was somehow remarkably present in the skies above Bethlehem when the men finally arrived in the town. From this perspec-

tive, Matthew was never referring to the star as a visible guide that played a role during the journey. "Seeing the star" also had to do with a renewed appreciation of the star's symbolic significance over Bethlehem, not just visibly seeing an object. The star could have been visible every night for weeks previously, but without any specific renewed messianic symbolism. In Bethlehem, the men "rejoiced exceedingly" because of the meaning they attached to the star, not because they expected it to lead them anywhere. The star was not a guide, it only functioned as a sign, both in the east and over Bethlehem. (See why the house is mentioned in the account at the end of this paper. It has nothing to do with the position of the star.)

A Possible Scenario:

While the wise men were in their homeland, the star gave symbolic indications that the Jewish Messiah had been born. After having received the star's message, the wise men went to Judaea. At every moment during their expedition, the men journeyed during the daytime like normal travelers. The way to Judaea was well-known. They were not looking to the star for visual guidance because the star's purpose had been to give a message. The star was a sign concerning the Messiah. It was not a guide. Over a period of months, the star came to be positioned well above the men's heads during a portion of each night. In the days before the Magi arrived in Bethlehem, the star was near to the zenith in the nighttime skies above Bethlehem. The star rose in the east each night and then climbed up above of the heads of the wise men as part of the regular rotation of the earth.

After the Magi finally had arrived in Bethlehem (having traveled there in the daytime), they unexpectedly came to the conclusion that the star had again become a celestial sign concerning the Messiah. This realization

happened at night in Bethlehem itself when the Magi saw the star in specific circumstances. In this manner the star “preceded” the men to the skies above Bethlehem. Essentially it was waiting for them when they arrived. In a similar way, decades later, Jesus also “preceded” the disciples to Galilee after his resurrection and then the men saw him there. It is clear that the disciples did not visually follow Jesus to Galilee after his resurrection. Likewise, the Magi never visually followed the star anywhere. To better understand how the star “preceded” the wise men to the skies above Judaea see the story of the “Lamp Repairman” in the next paragraphs.

The wise men finally discovered the young Messiah and his parents through doing a careful search. They then presented their gifts in the private setting of Mary and Joseph’s home. The wise men’s visit happened well after the birth of the child (following his circumcision, etc.). Joseph desired to return to Judaea after taking his family to Egypt. However, Joseph was afraid to go there because of Archelaus who was reigning in the stead of his father Herod (Matthew 2:21-23). Apparently, Joseph wanted to return “home” to Bethlehem, indicating that he had established his family in Bethlehem for a longer period, not just during the census. The family only went to Nazareth as a result of a dream that took place as Joseph was debating about the course of action to take following their journey to Egypt.

Why is a House Mentioned in the Account?

Even very early in Church history most Christians and skeptics assumed that Matthew mentioned the wise men “going into a house” (Matthew 2:11) to affirm that the star was directly above a certain house. John Chrysostom thought that the star was finally located within meters of Jesus’ head in Bethlehem. Such ideas are reflected in artwork and Christmas cards. Howev-

er, Matthew’s text does not inform us about the height of the star above the place where the young child was located. When Matthew mentions that the Magi “went into a house” (εις την οικίαν) to see the child Jesus, the apostle was not necessarily trying to indicate anything about the exact position of the star precisely above or near a specific house. Even so, the star was certainly in the sky above Bethlehem sometime during the night.

The wise men did not present their gifts or bow down before Jesus in a public setting. In Matthew’s Gospel events that took place in private circumstances were sometimes specifically mentioned as having taken place in homes. By mentioning the Magi’s entering into a house, culturally Matthew simply may have been underlining the private nature of the meeting. Jesus often gave further insight to his disciples concerning his teachings in private homes. See similar examples of events happening in private circumstances in Matthew’s Gospel in chapters 13:36-43 and 17:24-27.

The Lamp Repairman And The Great Sale

The following story illustrates the interactions of the Magi’s star and the wise men by analogy. It is meant to be both amusing and instructive.

In a certain very large city, there were three friends, Balty, Mel and Casimir. They lived on the far eastern side of the city. One day they went for a walk and saw another friend named Starry Bob, who was a lamp repairman, high above the ground on a ladder repairing a street lamp. Although Bob was far up in the air on his ladder above the ground, there was a lively conversation for several minutes. Toward the end, Starry Bob yelled

down to his three friends, "There is a great sale taking place at Walden's Superstore on the other side of town." He continued saying, "It is not to be missed, I encourage you to go and find all the good deals."

The three friends continued on their way. Having taken their friend's advice to heart, they walked speedily toward the west, toward the massive store. At one traffic light a car stopped, and the mayor stepped out. The three friends were a bit embarrassed, but the mayor greeted them kindly and asked them where they were going in such a hurry. They all responded to the mayor together, "We have heard from a friend about a great sale at Walden's Superstore. We are hurrying to get there." The mayor responded, "I too have heard about this great sale. "Could you be so kind as to send me a SMS if you see something really interesting?" The mayor gave them his personal phone number and the men went on their way.

At the massive store, there was a huge crowd in several lines. The men started asking others in the waiting line where the best deals might be located. And behold, unknown to Balty, Casimir and Mel the lamp repairman Starry Bob had another job repairing and installing lamps at Walden's Superstore. Starry Bob had taken his truck and gone on before his three friends to install an important new lamp just inside the main entrance of the store. He preceded them there by at least a half hour.

Finally getting through the main entrance Balty, Casimir and Mel saw a high folding ladder standing almost over the entrance. Looking up, the three men saw Starry Bob, who just happened to be looking down as they entered the store. Starry Bob yelled down, "I told you it would be a fantastic sale, see the crowd!" At that moment Starry Bob connected the new light. Then everyone could see clearly to find the best deals. Mel, Balty and Casimir, being a bit superstitious, took it as a sign that they had made the right choice in coming to the store.

Commentary on the Story:

The Magi's star gave messages and preceded the wise men to Bethlehem in a similar manner to what is described above. Starry Bob never visually went before his friends. However, he arrived at Walden's Superstore before they did. Starry Bob gave a message. He more or less repeated his message at the store. Starry Bob was not a guide. He was a messenger.

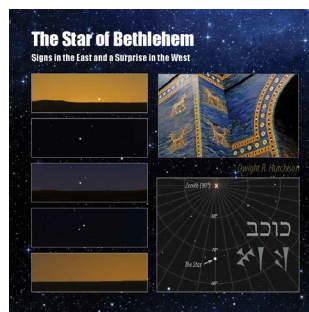
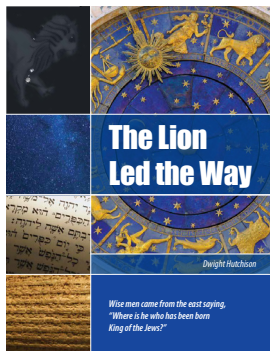
The Star of Bethlehem functioned as a messenger and sign. It did not guide or lead anyone to Bethlehem. The star preceded the Magi from the east to Bethlehem chronologically and "spatially," getting there in advance of the men on the ground. However, it was not visually leading the men to the town or the very spot where the Messiah was located. The star was not visually in front of the men during their travels. After the Magi's arrival in Bethlehem, above the small Judean town the star manifested itself again as a sign concerning the Messiah. The star never led anyone anywhere. The star was a signal, a sign concerning the Messiah, not a directional indicator or guide. (Please note: Matthew does not tell us how many wise men participated in the journey from the east to Judaea. Was it 2, 3, 5, 7 or more?)

The Author's Books available on Amazon.com

The Lion Led the Way, 3rd Edition 2015. This book is an indepth look at history, the star and the Magi. It contains almost 400 pages.

A Sign Over Bethlehem, 2015. This is a much reduced version of *The Lion Led the Way*. It contains about 100 pages.

The Star of Bethlehem: Signs in the East and a Surprise in the West, 2016. This is the author's shortest attempt to describe the Star. It contains about 50 pages of text as well as some notes and appendices.



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