

# BIRTH OF CHRIST – SOME PERSPECTIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

The Birth of Christ is recorded in Scripture. No further information is necessary for us to understand that Jesus, true God, Himself, came to earth to live among men and to suffer and die to redeem mankind from the consequences of their sins. Scripture briefly mentions some of the history surrounding His birth. However, these snippets need further historical understanding to give us a better perspective, and satisfy our natural curiosity. Unfortunately much of the history is buried in antiquity, and although it is continually researched, none of it can be established beyond a doubt. Every historical item has a range of acceptance among the historians.

The scriptural account itself is certainly true in all details. But our understanding of the account depends greatly on translation, which sometimes can be legitimately disputed. If our own translation differs from one widely circulated, there is always the chance that it is inferior, even though it better fits our individual background. Our understanding of the environment and settings surrounding the events being described can also greatly alter the meaning of a sentence, the proper translation being the one compatible with the actual circumstances. I offer an example:

Consider the sentence, “I will take that watch.” If that were spoken by a sailor aboard a ship, he would be offering to work a particular shift. When uttered by a customer in a store, it is an offer to purchase a timepiece.

The Scriptural accounts are reproduced below in the traditional King James Version, KJV. Words in *Italics* will be the subjects of comments.

## LUKE 2: 1 – 5

1 ¶ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (*[And] this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.*) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph

also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (*because he was of the house and lineage of David:*) 5 *To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

## Caesar Augustus decreed a taxing, the first, when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.

The general consensus is that “Taxing” is better translated as “enrollment” for either a census or taxing purposes. Enrollment processes took place on several occasions during the Roman rule. The word “first,” which is applied to this particular enrollment, if properly translated and understood, can be a key in determining the date of Christ’s birth.

The scoffers in the early 1900’s claimed Cyrenius did not exist. The church literature countered that he had been lost to history. It is now accepted that he was a famous Roman general better known as Quirinius, who was a special friend and agent of Augustus, and was sent to Syria and Judea more than once, to enforce taxation and control rebellions. For a time he was the Governor of Syria.

The NIV translation differs somewhat:

This was the *first* census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

It has been generally established that Quirinius was appointed governor of Syria about 6 AD. But this is ten years after the accepted time of Herod’s death, who we know was the King of Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth. There are several historical theories, both among believers and scoffers, that are offered as resolutions of this seeming discrepancy.

One version notes that Quirinius was in Syria and Judea around 6 BC, (BC, not AD) and was in charge somewhat in a capacity of acting governor for a time. This roughly fits the NIV above. Another, rather awkward, translation has been proposed that says this census took place during the first time he was the governor.

I suggest that the preferred translation is:

“This was the previous enrollment to the one taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” The Greek word translated “first” is legitimately translated “previous.” “Previous” is a word not used anywhere in either the NIV nor KJV to translate this word, but the words “before” and “former” are both found, in both translations for that same Greek word. In a number of other uses of the word the context would also easily allow “previous” to be legitimately substituted, as I suggest. For example, as in Rev. 21:4. “for the *former* things are passed away.” (KJV)

The Greek word is *protos*. *Pro* simply means “before”, and *protos* is the superlative form. So the literal translation is: “*This was the taxing most prior to that taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.*” “When” is not present in the Greek, but was added to accommodate the English format.

This word illustrates a common problem confronting translators. People speaking different languages don’t always employ the same logical processes to allow a particular word to express various other thoughts. So in Greek the word for “way before” can in context also mean “chief in rank,” “first in order,” “former,” or “previous.” My high-school classmates and I, struggling with translation, agreed that “those Greeks didn’t think the same way we do.”

In Acts 5:37, Luke refers again to a *taxing* (the same Greek word being used.) This time Luke’s record had no need to point out which taxing was involved, since it is a famous event that happened while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All modern historians agree. The Acts passage describes a famous revolt to this *taxing* that was led by a ‘Judas of Galilee.’ So this serves as a convenient reference point to identify the *taxing* of Joseph and Mary as the “previous one.” So we need to examine the previous taxing enrollment. It is somewhat obscure.

The Roman world had periodic censuses. There is some evidence that one or more of these may have required journeys to home towns, although historians disagree. However, none of the known census enrollments fits the scenario of Jesus’ birth, time-wise. Additionally, taxing of individuals, personally, from Rome was almost unheard of. Romans depended on the local rulers to tax the people and subsequently pay tribute. But their legions of soldiers, recruited from all

over the world, had created such acute financial problems for Augustus that that he levied a special empire-wide inheritance tax to pay the army. This required individual enrollment.

The second inheritance tax carried out by Quirinius in 6AD is well recorded, but some records refer to a previous assessment that had not been completely successful, and by that time had fizzled out. It is thought that General Quirinius, was a logical overseer of fundraising for the army. He had been sent to Syria and Judea for a period some time during Herod’s latter reign. (Herod died in 4 BC.) Some evidence will be covered later that indicates the taxing and Christ’s birth may have been in 6BC.

### **The house and lineage of David**

It would be difficult for historical records to convey the details here. Speculation may be able to supply them, if done with a sincere attempt to remain truly compatible with Scripture and credible historical evidence.

Where Scripture records the commandment against coveting the neighbor’s house, Luther recognized a direct connection to inheritance, and connected them in his Catechism. Joseph *was of the house and lineage of David*. “The economy of Scripture” limits the anecdotes of one Gospel account from repetition in another, except for major events. But why does Luke’s account use both house and lineage? They must be separate items. It seems that one denotes descent, the other partaker in the inheritance.

A collection of inheritance tax in the Israelite realms had to be largely associated with real estate. In areas controlled by Jewish laws if a family sold land, it reverted to the original family in the “Jubilee year,” observed every fifty years. So there was a rather stable linkage between family lines and land holdings that survived for centuries. Jesse was a landowner in Bethlehem. David, his son, certainly added to it. Solomon, David’s son, was among the richest of all times. And all of them were in Joseph’s family tree. There followed many rulers, Babylonian captivity, reconstruction, wars and turmoil, but Bethlehem was still recognized as the city of David, and David’s descendents and heirs were rather well documented. The total estate may have included the town of Bethlehem and land for miles around. There were obviously many heirs, some of whom probably owned a

small portion, not enough to live on, but able to generate some rent.

It was especially easy for the tax collectors to enforce the registration and payment, since the penalty would be disinheritance. So Joseph went to register his claim and pay his tax, *with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child*. She went along because she was with child so that her baby could be registered as an heir.

The Christian writer, Justin Martyr, said that the registrations of Joseph and of Mary's Baby, could be read in the Bethlehem town records in his day. Those records have all since disappeared.

**CONCLUSION: Jesus was born in Bethlehem at the time of the Inheritance-tax enrollment, the one previous to the taxing enrollment enforced while Quirenus was governor of Syria.**

### **LUKE 2: 6 - 7**

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; *because there was no room for them in the inn.*

### **The Inn**

The "motels" of those days were called "caravansaries." They had a large secure enclosed yard for the pack-animals, surrounded by a wall containing semi-covered stalls and merchant shops. There were usually one or more buildings with storage on the ground floor and second or third floors, the "Inn." These were divided into cubicles with large window opening to catch the breeze and dispel the odor from the yard. Fabric drapes were used to block the breeze in cold weather. Whether such a unit was located at that time in Bethlehem has been questioned, but the text is clear that it was a place having at least one stable and a public rental room in which no space was available. (A 'bed and breakfast' perhaps?) The Greek word used by the Spirit, here translated 'inn' was used elsewhere in the Bible in only two other places, in Luke and Mark, for the room where the disciples prepared the Lord's passover supper. Many edifices in that hilly region were built beside a cave that was used as a stable, another distinct possibility for Jesus' birth place.

### **LUKE 2: 21 - 35**

21 ¶ And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present [him] to the Lord; 23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) 24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. 25 ¶ And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name [was] *Simeon; and the same man [was] just and devout*, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. 33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. 34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this [child] is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; 35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

### **Simeon; a just and devout man.**

Mary was required by the ceremonial law not to enter a "sanctuary" for at least forty-one days after giving birth to a son, but then to offer the sacrifice. For this they went to the temple in Jerusalem, where they encountered Simeon. Here Scripture reveals insights into the society into which our Savior was born. Simeon was devout, best described as a worshipper of the true God. He strove to worship in the manner that God had ordered through Moses. And there were many like him. God was still blessing the people through the temple worship and sacrifices, although Jesus had arrived, and intended to abolish those worship modes through His new covenant. But there was also great turmoil both in an out of the religious realm. The religious leaders had

corrupted the doctrine and replaced it with many pagan ideas.

There was a frenzy of anticipation for the arrival of the Messiah. The devout were awaiting Jesus. The majority was expecting a super general to defeat the Romans and Persians, and allow Israel to rule the world. The Pharisees expected him to kick the Sadducees out of the temple, and vice versa. Several other sects expected him to place their own parochial leaders in charge. Many, like the sect that produced the Dead-Sea Scrolls, had morphed him into two, one military, the other a religious leader.

The people were well aware of the messianic prophecies in the book of Daniel where the numbers of years add up to that particular era as the time for Messiah to appear. Several opportunists had already claimed to be He. Each had amassed a following, and then disappeared or been executed for rebellion. Others have also been reported to have come later.

### **Some evidence for a date of Christ's birth in late 7BC or early 6BC**

Scriptural evidence is spotty, but contains check points that plainly rule out much of the published speculation.

Herod ruled at the time, and died in 4BC. His three sons divided his empire.

Joseph, Mary, and the Baby came back from Egypt when Archelaus, Herod's son, ruled in Judea. They feared him and went to Gallilee, although Herod's other son, Antipas ruled up there. (Antipas was the 'Herod' in the crucifixion narratives.) The reason to fear one, and not the other is not given, but Jesus' divine mission was not completely unknown, and certainly better known in Judea.

When Baby Jesus was brought to the temple it was well noticed. His true identity was known to many others: Some were His mother and step-father, relatives in Bethlehem, shepherds, Mary's cousin and her associates, temple priests, Simeon and Anna and the rest of the temple crowd. Herod had certainly been aware, and his surviving family along with his staff and military surely remembered.

After Herod's death, Mary and Joseph dared to come back, but not to Jerusalem, for continued fear of the King, who was now Archelaus. In Gallilee it was now

Antipas, but Jesus was less known up there. For that and perhaps other reasons, he was less of a threat, and the family settled in Nazareth.

In Luke 2:41 we are told that Jesus parents went to Jerusalem annually for Passover. Scripture does not say that they brought Jesus along. It is doubtful that they would have taken Him into the danger zone starting when He was 4-5 years old. But in 6AD Archelaus was deposed (An action overseen by Quirenius, incidentally) and exiled to Gaul. Verse 42 ff relates that when Jesus was 12 years old they all went to Jerusalem and Jesus made prominent contact with the temple priests. In 6AD Quirenius not only deposed Archelaus, but also revived the inheritance tax. Joseph and Jesus possibly needed to renew their registration in Bethlehem, which would have furnished His parents another reason to bring Jesus along to the Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus was twelve at that time, indicating that He was born in late 7BC or early 6BC.

### **THE "WISE MEN"**

The previous centuries to Christ's birth saw great strides in science. Astronomy, because of its use in navigation as well as in astrology, was considered the "queen of the sciences." Excellent sextants and other instruments had been devised. These instruments were calibrated and augmented by noting the reflections of stars and the sun in a deep well, which showed that the star was directly overhead. The tilt of the earth's axis was regularly measured and tracked by many, including Pythagoras, in 515 BC. The earth's circumference was measured with an error no larger than 25 miles by Eratosthenes and others. The distance to the moon still had an error of 8%, and, unfortunately, the distance to the sun awaited some hundreds of years for a measurement to be devised. Particularly active in these activities were the Magi of northern Persia. It is completely false that the ancients thought the earth to be flat. Although ancient writings exist showing that some educated writers were still unaware of the scientific evidence regarding the solar system, most astronomers, navigators, architects, and their associates were well aware of the basics.

Astrology was rampant, and the prophecy of Balaam (Num 24:17) mentioning a star marking Messiah's birth was causing a renewed interest in star-watching. This interest extended far beyond the land of Israel.

## **THE MAGI and the STAR OF BETHLEHEM**

### **MATTHEW 2: 1 - 2**

1 ¶ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came *wise men* from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen *his star in the east*, and are come to worship him.

### **MAGI**

The Greek here uses the term “Magi”. The translation 'wise men' is poor. (1) Of course they were wise in seeking Jesus, but the word is the plural of Magos, the root of the word 'magic'. Just as Levites were known as priests of the LORD GOD, Magi were known as priests of the order of Zoroaster. They were the overseers of the Median religion. The only other use of the term in Scripture is translated 'sorcerer'.

The Magi were a Median society, known as scientists, scholars, astronomers (and astrologers), and priests. At the time of Daniel the Magi were the chief advisors to the king. Daniel, himself, for a time was the chief Magos. By the time of Christ's birth the Magi were consulted by many rulers, including the Roman Senate. They were not exclusively Medes and Persians, and included learned men from elsewhere, probably some Jews as well.

Scripture tells us that these were Magi who had observed a star. History tells us that many Magi were astronomers. It is then in keeping with scripture to infer that among this group of Magi were astronomers, and that they did as astronomers were known to do. They were far more advanced than is generally thought. Ancient astronomers had many types of instruments, and those that have been preserved were not only accurate, but are works of art.

I use "sextant" in a generic sense, to avoid scientific jargon that may mislead. The actual instrument in common use at that time is called an 'astrolabe', which served the same purpose. When astronomers traveled they carried sextants and sand-glass devices for timing. Water timers were common as well. They took turns counting their and their camel's steps. Most desert travel was necessarily at night. They took frequent sightings of the major stars, and all of the visible planets. Whenever they came to a well, they noted which stars might be reflected in it. That reflected star

would necessarily be overhead at that time. Some owned a mirror with a hole in it, particularly useful for observing a reflection in a well without their heads getting in the way. It is a natural conclusion that these astronomers did the same. (2)

These Magi are not identified in scripture as 'three', or 'kings'. They would typically require several men to make the star observations, and their party would probably have included an ambassador and servants.

### **HIS STAR**

What the star of Bethlehem really was has been the subject of much speculation for centuries. Few are true to scripture in identifying it as a single, miraculous, unique star. Others suggest conjunctions of one planet with another, or a planet with a fixed star. Comets, eclipses, and miraculous objects that hover low (Like UFOs) have all been touted. A claim that is quite prevalent theologically, and appears in commentaries, is that the 'star' could be low enough, point the way, and identify a certain house. I suspect these authors are unaware of the ancient astronomical ability to determine whether a star is directly overhead. Scripture calls it a star, and would describe UFO-like objects with other terms, as is done today. (3)

I consider the most likely candidate to be the unique star that suddenly appeared in 125 BC. It was miraculous, in that no other star has ever behaved as it was reported to behave. This unique star was bright enough to be seen in daylight.

The great astronomer Hiparchus observed the birth of the star and recorded it for us. The Chinese also recorded it. Ptolemy records the star's death, when he wrote in 150 AD. "It can scarcely be seen." The star grew up in a few days' span, remained brilliant for a much longer time, then faded gradually. It was not a super nova, since it lasted much longer than a modern astronomer considers possible, and was, of course, unexplainably brighter.

The Christian writer, Ignatious, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, described the Bethlehem Star as a unique star, and described its brightness "above all stars, or the sun, or moon" about 110 AD. He used the miraculous nature of the star as an apologetic for Jesus as Messiah. His account of general society being awed and puzzled by this star denies the idea of only a few Magi observing it one night, low and indicating a particular

house, and only known generally by the divine inspiration of Matthew. It does match the daystar described here, however.

This daystar is ignored by most speculators on the Bethlehem star, and is unknown to most of them. It is sometimes referred to as “Hiparchus’ or Ptolemy’s nova,” and is assumed that each probably lasted a few months as do the novas. Modern astronomers dismiss all ancient data as primitive and inaccurate for reasons I have determined to be totally defective. (4)

The star was located by Hiparchus accurately enough for us to expect it to pass directly over Bethlehem around Easter time during the years of Jesus' ministry. When Matthew wrote about it, perhaps 175 years after it first appeared, there was no need for explanation, as everybody had seen the daystar -- it was simply there. The Christians also were all familiar with it as "His star". Matthew expected to be understood when he said the Magi had "seen His star in the East." Peter in his epistle describes Christian Faith as when "The day star arises in your heart." (Commentators who think this is Venus, which is briefly visible in the twilight, ignore the fact that worship of Venus was inimical to faith, and could never be used in that context by Peter. )

Avoid astrology. Until modern times most astronomers were also astrologers. Many still are. Astronomy is wholesome and useful. Astrology is condemned by God. Many people confuse them. Scripture declares that God named the stars. To a great extent His original names can still be found, translated into many languages. Many documents of ancient historians and Jewish rabbis indicate that the figures in the zodiac were originated by Seth and Enoch, to illustrate the fundamentals of God's plan of salvation. The role of Enoch in cataloging stars is also mentioned in the Dead Sea scrolls. The zodiac is traceable with little variation as far back as archeology can probe. The pagan mythology bears little resemblance to its original meaning. Christian authors have done a credible job of translating the probable original meanings. A simple illustration is Orion, claimed to be made/owned by God, twice in Job, and once in Amos. In Orion's side is the star, 'Wounded', and 'Bruised' is in his leg. His other ankle is marked by a star named 'The Foot That Crushes', and immediately beneath it is the head of the serpent. Compare this to genesis 3:15 where God says to the devil/serpent, "He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel."

The day-star was located in the constellation named "The Desire of the Nations" or Coma, completely obliterating all the surrounding stars by its unimaginable brightness and beauty. Since Coma graphically represents the "Son of the Virgin", and since the unusual new star was located in the very head of the child, as it was generally drawn in the pictorial representations of the Zodiac, most God-fearing people considered it a divine sign that the Messiah was about to appear. So that, I believe, is most likely "His Star."

### IN THE EAST.

(2) Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen *his star in the east*, and are come to worship him.

The Greek for 'East' is literally "In the Sunrise." That word is generally used in Greek for the East, as in the previous verse, "Wise men from the east." But I earnestly question the translation 'East' in this following verse. There is no other word in Greek, at least none used by the Spirit in the New Testament, to denote "East." So it is in no way awkward to find the same word immediately used in its natural sense of "sunrise," particularly by an astronomer talking about a star.

As our globe circles the sun our relatively near-by sun appears to walk around the far distant star-field annually, eastward. Its rate is two of its diameters per day. To our natural perspective, however, since our "day" and time is synchronized to the sun, we observe the star field seeming annually to rotate around us, each star moving westward, the distance of two sun-diameters, daily. (5)

It is useful to remember that this slow movement of the sun relative to the stars is independent of the daily revolution of the whole system westward, where the sun and all its accompanying stars rise in the east and set in the west, the stars rendered invisible by sunlight during the day.

If on a particular morning a certain star rises with the sun, it is not visible in the glare. But the next day, it is two sun diameters ahead of the sun. So it rises two diameters ahead. The brighter ones then are very briefly visible, and the observer knows, "Yesterday the star was neck and neck with the sun." The date when a star rises with the sun has always been the most accurate means of locating its position. The term is "In the

heliacal rising.” This has been the standard jargon of astronomers and astrologers forever, and simply means “Located on the same celestial longitude as the sun on that particular date.” It could actually be said that the star is “in conjunction with the sun” at that time.

And that is the Greek word employed by the Holy Spirit through Matthew, when the Magi said, “We have seen His star in the “sunrise” (heliacal rising), and have come to worship Him.”

(The NIV translates it as, “We have seen His star in its rising . . .”)

Note that on a day when a star is heliacal in Iraq it will generally also be heliacal in Jerusalem, or in America, since the sun will have moved less than a diameter in the time between dawns in those places. When a star is heliacal, like the sun it is at the zenith at noon, when stars are normally difficult to see, except for some reported comets and, of course, the day star.

Three months after heliacal, on a known date, the star is directly overhead at dawn. (The instant of dawn in ancient times was always easier to determine accurately than midnight, although sophisticated astronomers could always determine time by using their sextants on known stars or observing them on the horizon.) Another three month later, six months after Heliacal, the star is overhead at midnight. The star being overhead at Bethlehem is a prominent part of Matthews’s later narrative. The star could pass the zenith on any day of the year, since it was visible during the day. But time of day when it is overhead depends upon the time of year, and the star overhead at midnight would occur only on one single night of the year.

Although we cannot be certain, the most probable is that they sought the star overhead at midnight. That would have happened approximately at Easter time, a very significant time. Magi were equipped to determine midnight. A lesser probability would be overhead at dawn, easier to measure, and happening around Christmas. But as developed later, that would have less significance.

### **MATTHEW 2: 3-6**

3 When Herod the king had heard [these things], *he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.* 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the

people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, [in] the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

### **Herod and All Jerusalem Were Troubled.**

King Herod now heard about a new king of the Jews, known to the Magi, but not previously to him. This was obviously very disturbing to him, but not to the people. He was not popular, but they had another major worry. About sixty years previously Magi had gone to the Roman senate with a similar announcement of a new infant destined to be the Roman Emperor. In that case there were many children killed to prevent his survival, Was this destined also for Jerusalem?

### **Why This Particular Year?**

The Magi needed another reason to come in that particular year. The star was level with the sun (heliacal) in September for several years running, and overhead at midnight in March. This was true for the entire period that Jesus’ birth might have occurred. There are three possibilities I entertain for the Magi to have chosen this particular year.

1-God may have given them a special revelation. There are pros and cons to this, as well as the other two.

2-They may have ascertained the date when the latitude as well as the longitude would have placed the star directly over Bethlehem. When they were on the site, they actually determined that it was overhead. But their calculation in advance would necessarily have had an uncertainty wide enough to include Jerusalem.

Although that calculation would have been a challenge, I cannot rule out their ability to have made it. We cannot make it today, since we do not possess an accurate enough description of the star’s position. They, however, would have measured it over the years, and would have perfected a very precise location.

3-This is the one I have known since childhood and still have a preference for:

There was a well-known ancient prophecy, whether genuine or not does not matter, that the great King of

the Jews would be born when a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn should occur in the "House of the Hebrews" (Pisces). This had happened when Moses was born, and again when Cyrus was born.

[Isaiah 44:48 foretells how God would send Cyrus, years later to release the Babylonian captives, and give them permission and aid to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.]

So, prophecy or not, in both cases the conjunction occurred, the man was born, and the Hebrew slaves were freed. Josephus (6) states that it was when the Egyptian priests warned Pharaoh of the conjunction that he started having the Hebrew boys killed, although Moses escaped by being hid in a floating basket.

Should one believe an ancient legend, particularly one that seems so akin to astrology? Certainly not. It is strongly suspicious in this and in any other case where it is not recorded in Scripture. But Jewish history is clear that it was considered settled fact, at least among the rabbis. And other secular history confirms that it was widely believed elsewhere. It certainly was considered truth by the Magi.

Jupiter and Saturn are in conjunction about every eleven years. The location of the conjunction will fall somewhat randomly among the twelve "signs" of the zodiac. Most ethnic groups were associated with one or another of these signs. The early Israelites had the individual sign of each of their tribes inscribed on their marching banners. The full tradition, going back before the Egyptian captivity, was that the nation represented by the sign hosting the conjunction was welcoming a newborn king.

Pisces was the traditional sign of the Hebrews. Sixty years previously, in 63 BC, when the Magi made their presentation to the Roman senate, their evidence that the "Oracles" indicate the birth of a new ruler would have been based on a conjunction happening in "the house of the Romans." This could not be a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which was in 66 BC, but rather between Jupiter and another planet or fixed star. Many of these other conjunctions have been suggested as candidates also for the "star of Bethlehem," because of the widespread interest at that time in all conjunctions of Jupiter particularly by the Romans.

There is a great deal of evidence for this widespread belief. Joseph Seiss, a respected Lutheran theologian,

and editor of an important journal in the latter nineteenth century has referenced a number of writers that accepted this prophecy.(7) One of his sources was Isaac Abarbanel, a prolific Jewish theologian. (There are several alternate spellings.) He wrote several books concentrating on the messianic writings that are found either in the Bible or the Rabbinical literature. These were valuable resources for the early protestant scholars. In his Commentary on Daniel, he noted that such a conjunction was expected shortly, and that the Messiah was about to appear. Actually, Martin Luther was born the following year.

It needs to be noted that although they may be rare, ancient prophecies did exist that are not recorded in the Bible. Anna, mentioned in Luke's account when Baby Jesus was taken to the temple, was called a prophetess. The statement in Matthew that "the prophets said that Christ should be called a Nazarene" can be traced to no known prophet of Scripture.

The Book of Enoch, written years before the flood, but completely lost, is quoted in Jude. It is also quoted by some of the early Christian fathers, who must have had some access to it. It is referenced in one of the Dead-Sea scrolls as also discussing astronomic data. Its prophecies are lost, but are possible sources of some of the legends.

The importance to the visitation of the Magi is that they believed this 'prophecy,' as did the priests in Egypt at the time of Moses, and the Roman senate, about sixty years before Christ's birth.

### **MATTHEW 2: 7-8**

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.  
8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found [him], bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

### **WHEN ?**

The Star was in Virgo, in the constellation Coma. It was heliacal in September. That had been true for many years, and would have no significance to Herod. The Greek word for star can also mean a conjunction of two planets. That was significant. The planetary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn happened *in Pisces* in 7BC, but in a very rare triple form. Three conjunctions happened within a year in Pisces, in May, October, and December. This must have



been highly exciting to the Magi. Then the heliacal rising of “His star” in September would have easily clinched the conclusion that the long awaited Hebrew Messiah was born.

There were previous occurrences of the (singular, rather than triple) conjunction known to the Magi, and the most significant feature of each was that Messiah had not appeared. But this one held unusual promise. (to us, it is the only one in the proper Biblical time frame, but that, of course, was not a factor that could have coaxed the Magi to Bethlehem.)

The Conjunctions in Pisces in 185BC and 126 predated the daystar. The next was in Feb. 66 BC, a poor or impossible time to see it. (Stars in Pisces were obliterated by daylight between mid January and mid May approximately.) But by then Magi knew that the next one, in 7 BC, would be a triple. Perhaps some of them had come in 66, and found nothing, or on the basis of the political situation at that time, knew it would be futile. So this they expected to be it.

The evidence, then, directs a conclusion that the Magi came for the next possible time that His star would be overhead, over His dwelling, at a time of day that to them would be most symbolic according to their understanding. There are two choices, neither can be logically eliminated. They expected to find the newborn King directly under His star on a particular (presently unknown) date that they had calculated that was within two weeks of Easter, when it was overhead at midnight, or near Christmas, when it was overhead at dawn. I like Easter-time, which seems to “fit” better.

That is the time of the spring equinox. The first new moon of that season marks the New Year, appointed by God to Moses. Devout Jews marked their age to that day rather than the day of their birth. Two weeks later is the full moon, marking Passover (and now, Easter.) Having made the long journey from Galilee, it is extremely possible that the family may have wanted to stay for Passover, as well.

So to summarize on ‘the when’: His star was the only truly unique star in history. It was heliacal in September. This it had been for many years, including 7BC. The conjunctions occurred in May, October and December of 7BC, singling out that specific year. So the Magi came expecting to find the newborn King under that special star at midnight, six months after the heliacal rising, late-March, 6BC. Scripturally, this had to be after Jesus’ presentation at the temple, forty days

after his birth. Jesus’ birth was then no later than early February 6BC. How long before? There is some evidence that the family had intended to stay in Bethlehem, so the length of time could even include December 25, 7BC. It had to be a short time, since all the implications of the scriptural narrative are associated with His birth and very early infancy. There is actually no evidence for a Dec. 25 birthday. It was chosen, along with the year of 1 AD, in a series of miscalculations, including one for the solstice which is actually Dec, 22.

### **MATTHEW 2: 9-10**

9 ¶ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

#### **The Star Appeared Again ?**

**That is not the best translation.**

**I propose the following:**

[Underlines are my alterations.]

9 ¶ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they had seen in its heliacal rising, was before them, until it was directly above the location of the child. 10 When they had carefully observed the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11 And when they were come into the house, they discovered the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: . . .

**Lo:** This interjection has been interpreted to show that the Magi were surprised. But the Spirit is describing the circumstances with this passage, what actually happened. The men are not being quoted here. The reaction of the men is in the following verse. The interjection is by the Spirit, and means “Behold” or “Please understand.”

**“Was before them”:** This is a navigation account, and is phrased in navigation terms. Regular desert and sea travelers comprised a large portion of the early readers of Matthew’s account. They would have naturally understood these terms in the navigation sense. When using a star for guidance they kept it before them. They would say that it went before them, or that they continued to hold it before them. For the Magi, this was now an extremely delicate observation, so close to vertical, and essentially beyond the ability of their

instruments. However the Spirit is telling us here that it was indeed actually before them.

**“Was directly above the location of the Child”:** The word the KJV translates “**stood** over” is used more than a hundred times, with a wide range of meanings, most commonly being simply “was” or “were.” This is not an account reported by the Magi as to what they experienced. It is the Spirit describing what happened. A skeptic’s declaration that a star cannot be observed to be directly above a very specific location is irrelevant. God knew, and Matthew recorded by inspiration.

Now the Magi **carefully observed the star**. They needed something more accurate than their sextants to observe that it was, as Matthew's revelation attests, “above their location.” Tradition holds that they used the method astronomers had used for at least the previous two centuries, the reflection in a deep well. Paul Maier included a photo of “the Magi’s well” near Bethlehem in his book. (8) That may not be the authentic well, but it has been shown to tourists for centuries. So that tradition is well established, as well as being a most reasonable assumption.

The KJV uses the simple translation “when they **saw** the star.” The Greek word (eido) is used 663 times, and KJV translates it as “see” 314 times and “know” 281. This leaves 68 or over 10% of the usage among other meanings, which include “observe,” “inspect,” “examine.” Since it is rare for scripture to describe a scientific inquiry, one would not expect high usage of those particular shades of meaning.

### **They rejoiced**

As scientists they were certainly anxious as to the success of their deductions that His star would be over Him at six months after being heliacal.

10 When they **had carefully observed** the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

I have had several first-hand experiences of celebrating a successful scientific proof of a deduction, after a long and arduous time of preparation and observance. These Magi not only confirmed their deductions but also realized that they were about to see their God and Savior, Who had recently descended to earth. So their mirth was exceedingly great.

## **MATTHEW 2: 11-12**

*11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*

### **They saw the young child**

I suggest a better translation may be achieved by substituting another word for “**saw.**”

This brings out another problem facing a Bible translator. There are several cases where slight variations are found between the several ancient manuscripts that are available. This is one of them. Pious scholars agree that none of the variations cast any doubt on the doctrines of Scripture. In this case, it will alter the emphasis in Scripture between the seeking process of the Magi to find the Christ Child, and the visit they enjoyed with the divine Baby and His mother. By examining the various definitions used in the scriptural usage of each variant word, I find that both could actually be squeezed into the word “discovered.”

The manuscript chosen for the KJV translation is named the “Receptus,” although others were also consulted. The word in Receptus is “*Eureka*” (Found after intense search, or by complete surprise.) But here they departed from Receptus and found other sources that use the Greek “*Eidon*” (saw, examined, understood, discovered.) They then chose to translate the word as “saw.” I think that is defective. “See” is a proper translation in less than half of the cases where the Spirit used “*eidon*.” Other Greek words are used to express simply “seeing.” When *eidon* is used to particularly “see a person,” it is in the context of conferring-with (as we use the word to “see a doctor”) or having an interview. So if *eidon* is the correct version, I would suggest that the narrative would then be telling us:

“On entering the house, they **visited** the Child and Mary . . .”

The narrative, that had first told us that the star had been over the area, and that they had rejoiced over having observed it, now relates that they entered the house. We are not told by what means they selected the

proper house, but if the original was *eureka*, that they entered and, Eureka!  
(See the Note (9) for more detail)

### **Gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.**

These are often assumed to have spiritual meanings, representing Christ's atoning sacrifice. But they also had the practical purpose of financing the family's sojourn in Egypt, as they are the most portable and spendable wealth and currency of that era.

We are not told how these members of a pagan society became children of God, but God had certainly brought about their trek and honored it by directly communicating the warning that brought them home safely.

### **MATTHEW 2: 13-23**

13 ¶ And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. 14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son. 16 ¶ Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 18 In *Rama* was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, *Rachel* weeping [for] her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. 19 ¶ But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. 21 And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: 23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it

might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

### **Two years old and under.**

Literally, "in their second year" and younger. The Jews marked their age to the New Year's day, the first new moon after the vernal equinox. That would be some time between March 21, and April 18. Now, whether the Magi told Herod that Jesus was born at the first conjunction in May, or the heliacal rising in September, or the final conjunction in December, he would be in his "first year" at all times before the New Year, and in His "second year" thereafter. This is another possible indication that the Magi visit took place after the New Year. Since Herod's calculation included "and under" which would have included a child born after the New Year. Also, if the New Year were yet to occur, only those born within that same year (who were then in their first year) could have been included in the dates told to Herod by the Magi.

### **Great mourning in Rama, Rachel weeping for her children**

The connection of Rachel here in Jeremiah's prophecy can be a bit mystifying. We know this refers to the babes in Bethlehem, because God says so through Matthew's inspired pen. What is Rama? It is a community in suburban Jerusalem, just as is Bethlehem. Here it is obviously used symbolically for "The country around Bethlehem." Why Rachel? She was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. So she was the ancestral mother of the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh. The ancestral mother of the rest of Israel is Leah, Jacob's first wife.

Rachel died just outside Bethlehem, giving birth to Benjamin. She was buried there, and a famous monument was erected there to her memory. This monument survived for hundreds of years. So Rachel was known at the time Jeremiah wrote, as the symbolic Mother of the children in Bethlehem.

### **APPENDIX**

So what? I did the research because I find it fun and fascinating. I distribute it because there are others out there who may similarly enjoy it. If you have read this far, you are probably one such. But please don't fail to see the forest because of these trees.

I submitted an early version to a few trusted scholars to make sure I committed no embarrassing 'false doctrine' to writing. The Rev. Karl J. Anderson, of my home church, Heritage Lutheran, in Apple Valley, MN, submitted these very-pertinent comments:

The details you research are indeed interesting and edifying to the more experienced Bible student. Your attention to detail led me to think about why God did not inspire Luke to provide more detail.... more answers to more of our questions. The first answer to that is simply historical and sociological. Luke doesn't include contemporary historical details or explanations because that knowledge was then current and known by the common man. For example, our questions surrounding Quirinius and his governance of the province of Syria. After 2,000 years these details are misty and muddy to us, but as Luke wrote the Gospel the details were general knowledge. Scholarly study of available and reliable historical resources can help us better understand and appreciate the inspired text.

The second part of the answer (Why is there not more detail in the inspired text?) derives from understanding the central, focal point of Scripture. That point, of course, is Christ and his cross. God knows his creatures, he knows our fallen condition and its peculiar impediments, and he deals with us accordingly. For example, God surely could have directed Luke to describe in great detail the exact location of Christ's birth, the exact type of 'stopping place' Mary and Joseph came to in Bethlehem, a complete description of the "stable" (cave, etc.) and so on. God could have directed Luke to precisely establish with irrefutable cross-references to secular, Roman, calendar and time, the exact year, month, day, and hour of Christ's birth. But God did not direct Luke (or anyone else for that matter) to record any of that. Why? Because God knows us. If we knew and preserved the exact spot of Christ's birth we would have turned it into a temple and people would have idolized it. (It is bad enough that the supposed places of Christ's birth are to this day enshrined and worshiped.) Likewise the exact time of Christ's birth. God knew that we would enshrine that day on our calendars and turn it into a form of idolatry. (Again, consider what the world does with the appointed traditional festivals [East and West!] of Christ birth.) In the same way we would like more detail on the Magi, the shepherds, the leading star, etc. Our yearning for details, and our quest to find answers not revealed in Scripture, must not

distract us from the central point of the birth narrative of Christ: The Incarnation.

This will always be a dilemma for Bible scholars who always want to research and know all that there is to know on a subject. Scholars are not wrong in asking questions or seeking answers inside and outside of Scripture. At the same time, scholars must remember the purpose of Scripture-- and therefore the very purpose of Christian scholarship: "But these (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). All Christian scholarship, if it truly is worthy of the name, serves to point people to Christ and salvation. The intended audience must also come into consideration. New believers, converts, and young believers still need the "milk" of the Word and we must be careful not to distract or overload them with detail. On the other hand, mature Christians often find their confidence in the Word bolstered by the results of closer examination of detail and corroborating extra-biblical sources. – *Karl J. Anderson*

*(See 2Kings 18:4 for a startling case of people turning a sacred object into an idol. – WMO)*

## **NOTES**

- 1 Most people assume that a scientist is "wise" I benefit from that socially, but know first hand it is totally wrong. The use of that term in the KJV reinforces the fact that scientists were among the Magi.
- 2 During WWII our planes were equipped with a Plexiglas dome, strangely called an astrolabe, through which we could "shoot a star" and determine how many degrees 'before' or 'after' it was. We used a type of sextant (called an 'octant') equipped with a mechanical device for averaging the readings and overcome the effects of a vibrating and gyrating platform. We got amazingly accurate readings. Once on a flight from the Palau Islands to Guam we passed over a tiny atoll named Uliithe. Our navigator had allowed his watch to stop. While I manned the drift-meter, a downward-looking telescope with calibrated reticules, and informed him of the instant we crossed the tip of the atoll, he shot the sun, and set his watch with an error of only twenty seconds.

Now the Magi had no lenses in their sextants, but the advantage of their stable position on solid

ground certainly compensated for it. Our device averaged several readings, but the ancients often did the same, by employing several observers simultaneously. Again it is a very safe conjecture that the Magi had a sufficient crew to assure accuracy through redundancy. Incidentally, shooting a star is much more accurate than shooting the sun, because the sun is so large that it is hard to locate its center precisely.

I believe that having this understanding of the shooting of a star in the navigational sense renders the greatest clarity to the meaning of this passage.

3 If a luminous object were to stop over a house, low enough to be observed without instruments and small enough to have a meaningful position in respect to a house, it would not be honest to call it a star, it would not be one. If it happened today, any observer would call it a UFO. When his skeptical audience suggests he has mistaken a star for the object, he loudly objects, pointing out the vast difference between a star and a small luminous object that could be accurately pinpointed to be over a particular house, or even a particular town, by simply "eye-balling" it. Scripture says star, and I accept that, but do allow a closely associated pair of stars (conjunction,) since this is allowable within the colloquial use of the word.

4 This is published in a paper on the history of the tilt of the earth's axis where I show that if one recognizes the great flood, it leads to the scientific acceptability of many measurements of the tilt of the axis, some as early as the seventh century BC. These data are widely dismissed as primitive and inaccurate because they differ from modern uniformitarian calculations, that discount the flood. This leads to a blanket false rejection of all ancient data. Details are given in this paper presently available at :  
<http://tccsa.tc/articles/precession.html>

5 The stars residing near the sun's path, the ecliptic, move that two sun-diameters daily, but the distance shortens as their location nears the North Star, which appears essentially stationary. The stars near Polaris just circle it annually.

6 Titus Flavius Josephus: Was a Jewish general who was captured by the Romans, He was enslaved, and tasked to write the history of the Roman-Jewish wars, and of the early Jews. He made a full-fledged capitulation to the Roman cause, and became a citizen of Rome. He is

acknowledged as the foremost secular historian of the period.

7 The Gospel in the Stars, Joseph A. Seiss

8 Paul Maier, "In The Fullness of Time"

9 This is nit-picky on my part, but in the KJV the narrative seems to have been translated with an honest attempt to accommodate the translator's understanding that the context required that the very house had been already uniquely indicated by the star. Translating to context is proper and desirable, but I consider his context defective. I do not claim scriptural proof for my context, only scriptural and historical compatibility.

I am neither a Greek scholar nor at all educated into the various sources of scriptural manuscripts. My various computer tools are very useful, but are inadequate to decipher subtleties such as this one.

My good friend Al Braunwarth, though, has the requisite skills to study this, and he has done that for me. I greatly appreciate his help. He informs me that "eidon" (leading to the translation "saw") is the more likely correct original version, based on evidence of available sources

Because of the tools I have used, my research has been based on Strong's assumption that KJV is translated from Receptus, which is generally true. The 1550 Receptus does use "heurisko" (eureka), but according to Al there is "overwhelming witness for "eidon" in Matthew 2:11,". Nestle uses "eidon". So, although I suspect the KJV translators had motive to assume that no further search was needed, they did have legitimate evidence from other sources to use the word "saw." Although for eidon, the use of "visited" seems to have been a more accurate translation.

### **Addenda**

4/24/15: Ref Page 12 "the Magi had no lenses in their sextants" – It is now known that many centuries before, instruments incorporated rock-glass lenses. No other possible means is known for constructing the ancient structures so perfectly. Hundreds of these lenses in museums were originally thought to be mere ornaments. It is possible that the Magi still had preserved that art. The Vikings had polarizing lenses used to "see" the sun when navigating on cloudy days. The ancients may have done that as well.