



The Christmas Star

by John Paulsen

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No other celestial object has been written about more in the western world than the object known as the Christmas Star or the Star of Bethlehem. The nature of this object is as controversial today as it was centuries ago. From a scientific point of view there are several astronomical objects or groups of objects that are possible candidates for being THE STAR.

From a historical point of view, there are several recorded events for which the dates are somewhat uncertain. From a linguistic point of view, there are some problems with the use of terms that signify "star." If one were going to do a complete investigation of the Christmas Star, one would have to examine all three areas mentioned above.

This article is not intended to be a complete investigation but simply a report of the objects that are usually listed as possible natural explanations for the Christmas Star.

It is important to realize that the Bible contains very little information about the Star in Matthew's account. (The reader is encouraged to read Numbers 24:17 and all of the 2nd chapter of Matthew.) From the small amount of astronomical information in Matthew, other historical sources and the chronology of known astronomical events, scholars have tried to deduce the exact date of Jesus' birth, Herod's death, and other historical events.

Part of the problem is that in 525 A.D., Dinoyslus Exiquus, a monk, calculated the birthdate of Jesus, but in the process he miscalculated by 4 years. This would make the birth of Jesus to be 4 B.C. instead of 0. Most scholars today believe that Jesus was born between 8 B.C. and 4 B.C. with most favoring the 4 B.C. date. They also believe that Herod died in 4 B.C.

Before we examine the possible candidates, it should be realized that any candidate for the Christmas Star should be within the historically accepted dates of 8 B.C. and 4 B.C., must be astrologically a portender of good news, appear or brighten twice, and be able to be seen in the "east" and over Bethlehem from Jerusalem. Bethlehem is almost straight south of Jerusalem. Because we accept a literal interpretation of the Bible, the event should be a single object to match Matthew's "star." Our acceptance of a literal interpretation of the Bible is called into question by many scholars. Some people believe that Matthew was talking about a single group of stars, not necessarily a single star.



The following astronomical events have been seriously suggested as the event we know as the Christmas Star:

12 B.C.
7 B.C.
6 B.C.
4 B.C.

No dates

- Halley's Comet
- Triple Conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus
- Nova
- Nova / Comet
- Sirius - Dog star
- Venus - Morning star
- Tycho's star
- A luminous meteor
- Castor or Pollux
- Combinations of any two of the above — one for the star seen by the Wise Men in the east and the other for the star over Bethlehem.

We will now look at each of the candidates and the problems associated with them. The 12 B.C. appearance of Halley's Comet has been favored by many researchers. It was recorded by Chinese astronomers but not by anyone in the West. It could have appeared twice, as many comets do, and it could have been very bright in 12 B.C. The main problems are that comets are portenders of doom and gloom, not a joyous announcement of the birth of the King of the Jews and it was about 4 to 8 years too early.

In 7 B.C. Jupiter and Saturn came close together and crossed the meridian 3 times, a triple conjunction. This event is favored by many scholars as the star that was seen in the east and the Star of Bethlehem. They argue that the time between conjunctions provides the lead time needed for the Wise Men to see the first conjunction and then travel toward Jerusalem. Jupiter and Saturn are astrologically significant, which the Wise Men would have been aware of. This event is, however, about 3 years before the more commonly accepted date of 4 B.C. Another problem with this event is that it involves two planets, not a single star as recorded by Matthew. At no time do the planets come close enough to look like a single star.

Uranus would have been close to Jupiter and Saturn but certainly would not have been bright enough to be conspicuous. It simply would not have been noticed.

In 6 B.C. Mars, Jupiter and Saturn had a single conjunction and they were not very close. This even does not allow for the travel time and certainly would not look like a single star.



In that same year there was a Venus-Jupiter conjunction. It, too, was a single event but even more convincingly, Venus can never be seen very far from the sun; therefore it is seen only in the east or west. Thus, it could not have appeared over Bethlehem.

In 5 B.C. a nova was seen but novae have not been favored as possible Christmas Stars because they usually do not appear twice. They are only single events lasting several weeks.

In 4 B.C. another nova was seen along with a comet. In astrology, both comets and novae are signs for bad news, not the good news of the birth of the Savior which is what the Wise Men would have been looking for.

The other objects can be rejected fairly easily as candidates. First, Sirius and Venus would simply be too common, not rare events. An early brightening of Tycho's Star in 4 B.C. is not a recorded event but only a possibility that could have happened. A bright meteor would be such a transient event that it would not have told the Wise Men about such an important happening.

In the preceding paragraphs, we have found one or more reasons for rejecting all of the natural celestial events that could have taken place during the time frame of 8 B.C. to 4 B.C. and in the correct geographical area.

This conclusion has been reached by countless other searchers since the early centuries after Christ. We have wanted to know exactly when Jesus was born and what was the Christmas Star. At this time there doesn't seem a definitive date for the birth of Jesus and there doesn't seem to be a natural explanation for the Star. The only conclusion that we can reach is that it was of supernatural origin. Some scholars have hinted that since it was of supernatural origin, it may have only been visible to the Wise Men. This would account for it not being seen by Herod and the other people in the West as well as not being recorded by the Chinese.

We know that God uses natural means to accomplish his goals, but in this case there simply isn't enough information to be sure that it was a natural or supernatural event, but it is the feeling of the author that God would use a supernatural event to herald such an important event as the birth of his Son.

An interesting sidelight to our look at the Christmas Star is that even though the scientific community doesn't believe in God, they spend a lot of time devising possibilities for explaining the Star through a natural means. Almost every planetarium offers a Christmas Star program at Christmas time. It seems that the planetarium directors are trying to placate or satisfy their Christian constituents. *LSI*

