

The Star of Bethlehem

Holy Cross Bible Class

December 20, 2009



Star Investigation

- Why even ask the question?
- Search Luke 2:1-20 and Matt 2:1-20
- Find clues left regarding:
 - Time, Location, Who Involved



Outline/Plan

- Background – Wisemen/Herod
- Dating the Star
- Supernatural Theories
- Natural Theories
- Theory Specifics
- Conclusions?



Wise Men ? = 1. Essenes

- Jewish monks (near Dead sea)
- Astronomy studiers
- Matthew indicates from another country = not really an option



Wise Men ? = 2. Indian Buddhists

- Had similar teachings of Buddha and Christ
- Used astronomy to select their leader (Dalai Lami)
- Reincarnation, theological positions rule them out



Wise Men? = 3. Arabians

- Gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh were tied to Arabians.
- Nearness of Arabia to Palestine
- Language of Arabians similar to Jews, probably knew Messianic prophecies.



Wise Men? = 4. Chinese

- Recorded astrological events
- They thought China was the center of the world so why leave?
- “East,” but very far away. On the other hand, they had up to 2 years to get there.
- “We Three Kings of Orient Are”



Wise Men? = 5. Babylonians

- Experts in astronomy and astrology
- Saturn & Jupiter represented kings & royalty so planetary changes meant earthly events to them
- “Multi-godded” people



Wise Men? = 6. Persians

- Emerged from Parthian Dynasty
- Upper house of government, priestly class. Heroditus and Plato visited.
- The Magi were followers of Zoroaster, a pupil of Daniel
- Zend Avesta “Bible” includes Daniel prophecies



Daniel 9: 25-26

- "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, *there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.'* It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing.



Wise Men? = 6. Persians

- Zoroaster = state religion of Persia, *prophesied birth of king heralded by sign in stars in constellation Virgo.*
- Zoroaster included: a Good spirit fighting against a Bad spirit, eventually a savior comes to defeat bad, a son of a virgin



Wise Men? = 6. Persians

- Precedent existed
- “When Tiridates was made king over Armenia by the emperor Nero, *the new Magian king went to Rome with the other Magi to present gifts to Nero.* A great deal of ceremony was associated with this visit of the Magi.”



Wise Men? = 6. Persians

- Persians/Parthians were at war with Rome. Israel often the battleground between Romans and Persians
- Magi delegation guards would have penetrated Roman territory
- Groups probably riding horses, camels only carry baggage
- Herod “troubled” understandable



Magi Kings by Tradition



- **Caspar of Tarsus**
young, European and
offers gold
- **Melchior of Persia**
middle-aged, Persian
and offers myrrh
- **Balthasar of Saba**
elderly, Ethiopian and
offers frankincense



3 Kings Traditions



The elaborate story that we know today can be found in the *History of the Three Kings*, which is attributed to the fourteenth-century cleric John of Hildesheim.



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King Herod

- Read Numbers 24:17.
- Herod the Great, an Edomite, becomes King of Israel
- Herod murders any threat – even his wife, mother, sons, etc.
- Orders that upon his death one person from each house killed
- Ordered Bethlehem baby slaughter



Numbers 24:17 (NIV)

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,
the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.
– Balaam's Fourth Oracle



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“King of the Romans” Precedent

- According to Julius Marathus, a personal confidant of Augustus Caesar, *the Roman Senate in the year 63 B.C ordered all boy babies to be killed who were born in that year because prophetic dreams and astrological signs suggested that a “King of the Romans” was to be born.*
- The Senate ostensibly considered a “King of the Romans” to be anathema to the government of the Republic.

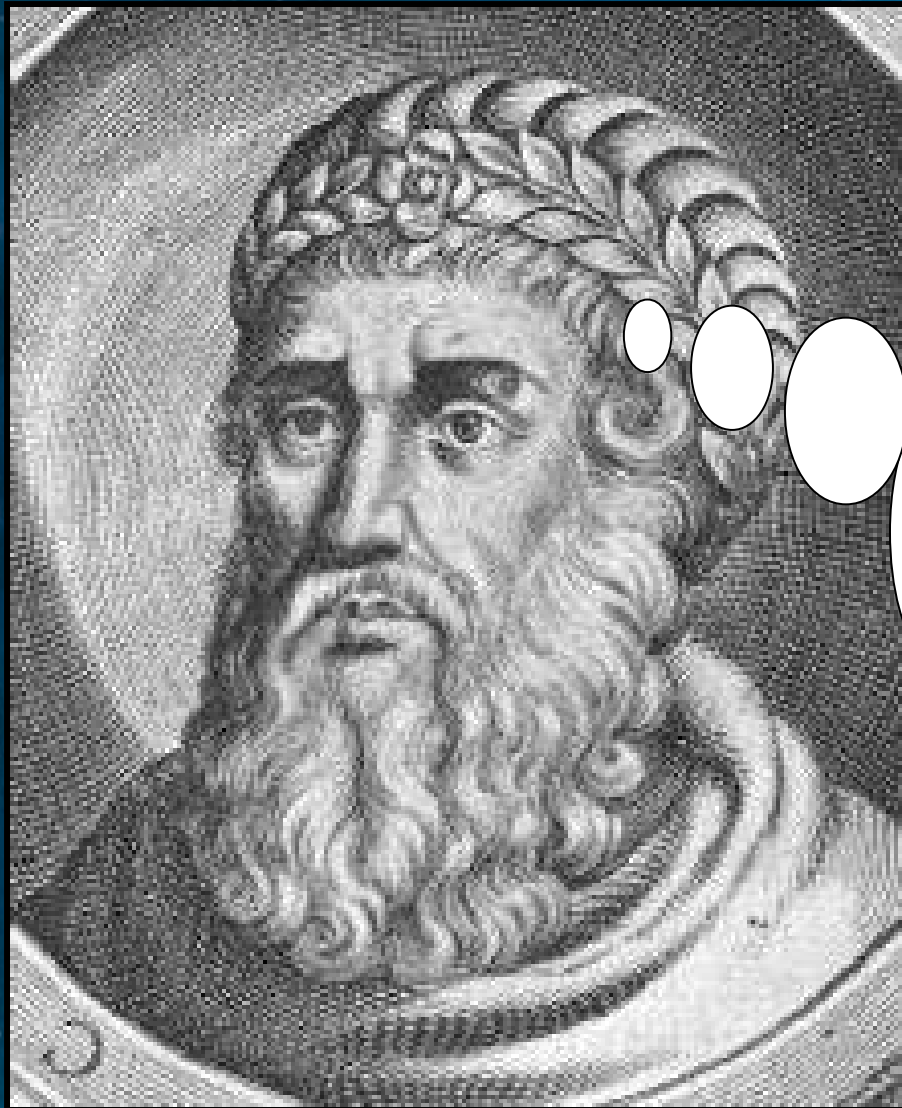


“King of the Romans” Precedent

- So concerned were some of the senators of this astrological interpretation, whose wives were pregnant, that they refused to register births from their wives in hopes that the signs applied to them.
- *We are informed that in that very year (23 September, 63 B.C.), the person who later became the first emperor of the Romans (Augustus) was born.*



Herod the Great



TO DO LIST

Do Laundry...

**Buy some
stamps...**

**Kill babies in
Bethlehem..**

Pay bills...

Herod's Death Date?

Josephus records:

- *Herod died shortly after an eclipse of the Moon seen at Jericho*, and sometime before the Feast of Passover.
- There was a Jewish holiday celebrating Herod's death on 2nd day of the month of Shebat.
- *Herod died after a reign of 37 years from the time he was made king by the Romans* and 34 years from the death of Antigonos.



Checking Eclipses: Lunar/Solar

- 7 and 6 B.C. = No eclipses.
- 5 B.C. = Eclipses March 23, Sept 15.
- 4 B.C. = Partial eclipse March 13.
- 3 and 2 B.C. = No eclipses
- 1 B.C. = *Total eclipse on January 10.*



Herod's Death Date?

- "When Did Herod the Great Reign?", **Andrew Steinmann**, *Novum Testamentum*, Volume 51, Number 1, 2009 , pp. 1-29.
- Professor of Theology and Hebrew at **Concordia University Chicago**. (R.F.)
- Argues Herod most likely reigned from late 39 BC to **early 1 BC**.



Census Ordered

- Three *empire-wide* censuses were in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and 14 A.D.
- Records of Roman Census from 104 AD and 119 AD found as well.
- The Greek verb is apographo, which literally means to "enroll" or "register" as in an official listing of citizens.



Q · AEMILIVS · Q · F
PAL · SECVNDVS · IN
CASTRIS · DIVI · AVG · Sub
P · SVLPICIO · QVIRINIO · Legato
CAESARIS · SYRIAE · HONORI
BVS · DECORATVS · PRAEFECT
COHORT · AVG · I · PRAEFECT
COHORT · II · CLASSICAE · IDEM
IVSSV · QVIRINI · CENSVM · EGI
A P A M E N A E · CIVITATIS · MIL
ITIVM · HOMIN · CIVIVM · CXVII
IDEM · MISSV · QVIRINI · ADVERSVS
ITVRAEOS · IN · LIBANO · MONTE ·
CASTELLVM · EORVM · CEPI · ET · ANTE
MILITIEM · PRAEFECT · FABRYM ·
DELATVS · A · DVOBVS · COS · AD · AE
BARIVM · ET · IN · COLONIA ·

Census Document

- Qvirinio = Quirinius?
- Censvm = Census

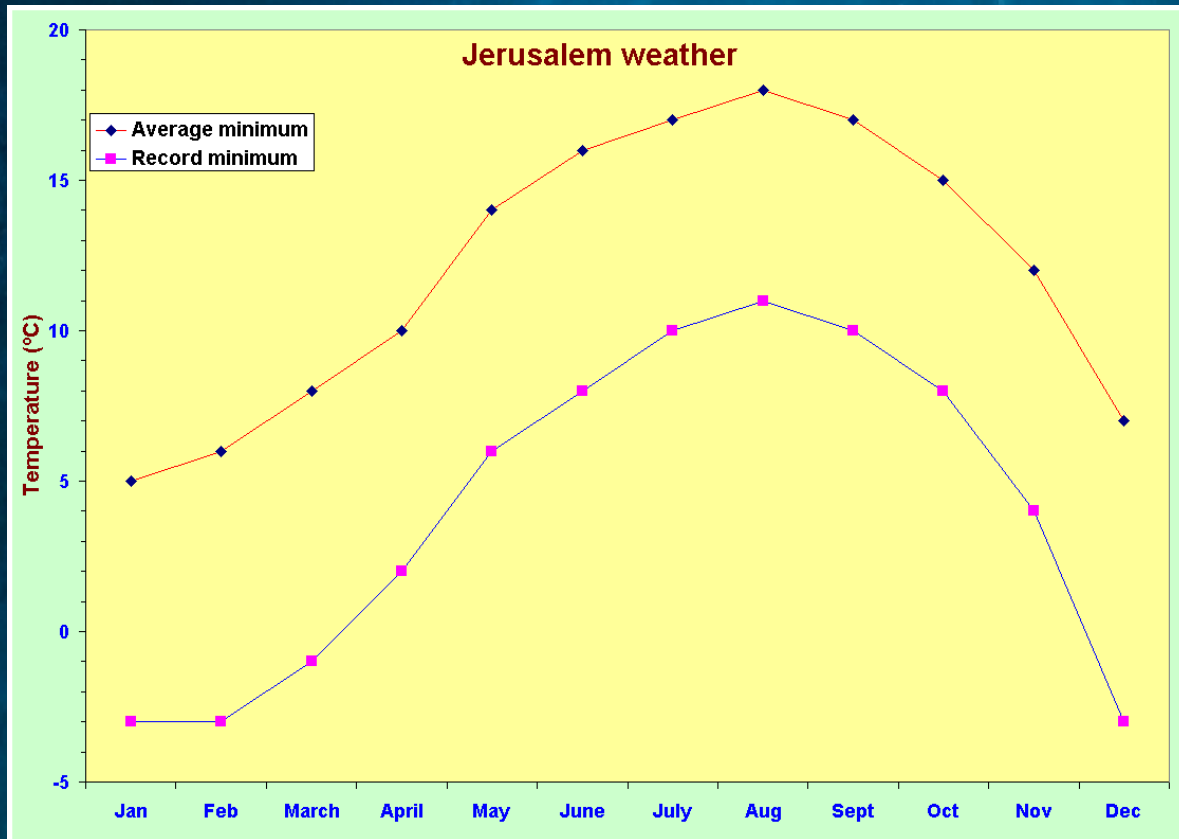
A Quirinius Problem?

- Roman historians Tacitus, Seutonius, and Dio Cassius, and Jewish historian Josephus all wrote of him. We know Quirinius governed around 6-7 A.D.
- This was the *first* census that took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.
- The Greek word for "first" (prote) is sometimes translated "**prior to**" or "before."
- Also beliefs that Quirinius may have been "elected" twice to office.



Birth Date: Weather

- Shepherds: only 2 times a year when sheep on fields - **spring or autumn**



Birth Date: Day of Trumpets?

- Kings announced with Trumpets.
 - Solomon, Jehu, Joash
- AKA. “Rosh Ha-Shanah”, which starts between Sept 6 to Oct 5.
- Considered a New Year’s Day.
(Joseph freed from Egypt prison on this day). *Period ends with the Day of Atonement.*



Cesar Augustus

- "Caesar Augustus" reigned as emperor of the Roman empire from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D., 41 years in all. His real name was Gaius Octavius and he lived from 63 B.C. to 14 A.D. He was the Grandnephew of Julius Caesar who legally adopted Octavius as his son. Octavius took the name "Caesar" from Julius, which in later years became a name almost equivalent to "emperor." "Augustus" is a Latin term that means "worthy of reverence."

From <http://www.orlutheran.com/html/census.html>



Reign of Tiberius

- Luke is very explicit that Jesus was on the threshold of his 30th birthday when he was baptized in the 15th of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1, 21). ... Thus, the 15th year of Tiberius' reign would be A.D. 29-30.
- Using the accepted method of reckoning, which makes the 15th of Tiberius equal A.D. 29-30, this means Jesus was born in 2 B.C. and turned 30 years old soon after his baptism, before Dec. 31st, A.D. 29.



Virgo Reference in Dating

- Again... Zoroaster (state religion of Persia) *prophesied birth of king heralded by sign in stars in constellation Virgo.*
- **Revelation 12** mentions “when sun and moon in Virgo.” This is usually considered Sept 10th 3 BC. or Sept 29th 2 BC.



Virgo in Revelation 12

“A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: *a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.*The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. *She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.*”



Suggested Dates of Christ's Birth

- **5 BC** = R. Faid, Day of Atonement
- **4 BC** = Many historians
- **Sept 11, 3 BC** = E. Martin, Day of Trumpets
- **Dec 25, 2 BC** = R. Larson
- **June 17, 2 BC** = J. Mosley
- **Sept/Oct 2 BC or 3 BC** = B. Setterfield



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Supernatural = Shekinah

Closest OT equivalent of “Holy Spirit”

- a. John 1:8 = Bear witness to the Light
- b. John 8: 12 = I am the Light of the world
- c. Ex 3:4-5 = Burning Bush episode
- d. Ex 33: 18-23 = Moses + God's face
- e. Num 9:15-17 = Tab. Cloud/Fire
- f. Luke 9:28-36 = Transfiguration
- g. Acts 26:12-18 = Road to Damascus



Revelations 22:16

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."



Supernatural = Other?

- God made a star move **because He can** ...so deal with it.
- God's motion detector went off in his driveway and the backyard lights went on.
- **Pastor Sorenson said so** and that is good enough for me.



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Natural Options

1. Meteor
2. Comet
3. Nova/Supernova
4. Planets/Constellation Conjunctions



Chinese Guest Star

- The chronicle, the “Ch'ien-han-shu” makes a statement which can be translated as:
- *“During the interval between March 10th and April 7th of 5 BC, a comet that was visible for more than 70 days appeared close to Alpha and Beta Capricornii”*



Korean Star

- A controversial record is found in the Korean “History of Three Kingdoms - the Chronicle of Silla (Samguk Sagi)” which can be translated as:
- *“On **March 31st of 4 BC** a **bushy star appeared** close to Altair”*



Comet's "Standing"

- Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, 54, 29) describing the comet of 12 BC (Halley's comet) which appeared before the death of Marcus Agrippa writes 'the star called comet stood for several days over the city [Rome]'.
- Marcellinus describing a comet of AD 390 writes 'a sign appeared in the sky hanging like a column and blazing for 30 days'.



Comet's "Standing"

- Josephus (*Jewish War* 6,5,3) states 'a star, resembling a sword, stood over the city Jerusalem]', probably referring to the comet of AD 64 mentioned by Tacitus (*Annals*, 15,47), comets frequently being described as 'swords' in ancient literature because of their upward tails (in a direction away from the sun).

From
<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Astronomy-Cosmology/S>



Novae Aquila

- Occasional Star in Aquila quadrant
- Some *known* flare ups dates:
389 BC, 1918 AD, 1999 AD
- Others at 134 BC and 173 AD.
- Supernova 100,000 brighter at first

From

http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/astronomy/nova_burst_010910.html



Novae Aquila = 1999



From <http://www.astro.uu.nl/~bassa/gallery/v1494.htm>

Planets/Constellations

1. Planets have **astrological meanings**
 - Saturn = Royalty
 - Jupiter = King
 - Regulus = King
 - Pisces = Hebrews
 - Leo = Kingship (*Rev 5:5 calls Jesus “the Lion of the tribe of Judah”*)
2. Placement in constellations
3. Meeting other planets = **conjunctions**



Triple Conjunctions

- 17th century Christian Astronomer, **Johannes Kepler**, calculated that **a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn** had occurred in Pisces 7 B.C.
- “*A Messiah-king will be born in Israel?*”
- Conjunction happened three times in 7 B.C. (in May, October and December)
- Additional massing of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in 6 B.C.



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Early Record of Dec. 25

- A Roman city calendar for the year 354* A.D. lists burial places of the martyrs arranged in the order of the days of the year on which festivals were held in their honor.
- The sequence of festivals in the church year begins with the item: “*VIII Kal. Ian. Natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*”
- The eighth day before the calends of January is December 25th. Thus, in the year AD 336, the festival of the birth of Christ was held on Dec. 25.

* = *Exact year varies with sources*

The background of the slide features a dark blue, textured surface with a subtle pattern of light rays. At the bottom, there are silhouettes of three figures riding camels, likely representing the Three Kings, moving from left to right.

Split Celebration

- **Western Churches** celebrated Christmas on December 25 after Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity the empire's favored religion.
- **Eastern Churches** used January 6 until eventually adopted December 25.
- *The Armenian church still celebrates on Jan 6.*



Previously

- A Latin treatise written around 243 A.D. pegged March 21, because that was believed to be the date on which God created the sun. So **Polycarp** (c.69-c.155) concluded that Christ's birth and baptism most likely occurred on **Wednesday**, because the sun was created on the fourth day.



Other Dates Suggested

- **Clement of Alexandria** (c.150-c.215) favored May 20 but noted that others had argued for April 18, April 19, and May 28.
- **Hippolytus** (c.170-c.236) championed January 2.



9 Months after Conception?

- Early Christian writer **Sextus Julius Africanus** (220 AD) speculated that the world was created on March 25th, based on his chronology of Jewish and Christian history.
- Since the Word of God became incarnate from the moment of his conception, this meant that, after 9 months in the Virgin Mary's womb, Jesus was born on December 25.

** from <http://www.ancient-future.net>*



Why Christmas on Dec 25?

- Converted Pagan holiday with Christian
- 1) Romans celebrated the **Winter Solstice**, SOL INVICTUS, the “**Unconquerable Sun**”
- 2) Birthday of Mithras, the Iranian “**Sun of Righteousness**”



Christmas Opposition

- **Origen** (c.185-c.254, Clement of Alexandria's student) preached that it would be wrong to honor Christ in the same way Pharaoh and Herod were honored. "Birthdays were for pagan gods."
- *Christianity Today* article



“Modern” Opponents?

- While Beza, **Luther**, and other reformers found no fault with Christmas, many Calvinist and Presbyterian reformers did, adopting a rule of worship that excluded all things not positively prescribed.
 - *from <http://www.dec25th.info/>*



John Knox

*“By contrary Doctrine, we understand **whatsoever men**, by Laws, Councils, or Constitutions **have imposed upon the consciences of men**, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as be vows of chastity, foreswearing of marriage, .. and keeping of holy days of certain Saints commanded by men, such as ... **Christmas, ... Epiphany....** Which things, **because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm...**”*



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Star Characteristics

- Read Matthew 2:1-12.
- Try to come up with 5+ facts / characteristics of the star.



9 Characteristics (R. Larson)

- It signified birth.
- It signified kingship.
- It had a connection with the Jewish nation.
- It rose in the east, like other stars.
- It appeared at a precise time.
- Herod didn't know when it appeared.
- It endured over time.
- It was ahead of the Magi as they went south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.
- It stopped over Bethlehem.



The Starry Dance



Caveat

“Just in case you are ready to proclaim the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem solved, remember that this whole scenario rests on Herod dying in 1 B.C. rather than in 4 B.C. The majority of historians and biblical historians can't accept this critical revision. If Herod indeed died in 4 B.C., all of these coincidences ...are just that, coincidences.”

- Ray Bohlin = Leaderu.com = Probe Ministries



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Personal Conclusions

- “Natural” is still “Supernatural” to me!
- Why wise men from afar and shepherds in the field?
- **Billboard vs. the Message.**



Resource Suggestions

- [The Star of Bethlehem DVD](#) by Rick Larson. ASIN: B002RBHDFK
- [The First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story](#) Paul L. Maier ISBN-13: 978-0825433306 (GOOGLE BOOKS)
- [The Star that Astonished the World](#) by Ernest Martin. ISBN: 0-945657-88-9
- [The Christmas Star](#) by John Mosley ASIN: B000V8ALN2



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5. <http://www.astrosurf.com/comets/cometas>
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1. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/>
2. <http://www.biblicalchronology.com/census>
3. <http://www.ankerberg.com/Articles/editors>
4. <http://www.biblehistory.net/newsletter/quir>
5. <http://www.ancient-future.net/christmasda>
6. <http://www.dec25th.info/dec25th-star-of-N>

