

# ***The Star of Bethlehem - a Bible Study***

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What was the Star of Bethlehem? Was it truly a star in the simple sense of the word? Most astronomers think not. No ordinary star could have performed in the manner of the "star" that led the Magi. Might it not have been something else? Some astronomers have made suggestions, but since astronomers aren't theologians, their interpretations of the star are limited to only ordinary manifestations of nature. This solution is most limiting when one is discussing a Bible story that refers to a virgin birth, miraculous dreams, and angels. All these things are outside the realm of physical science.

In this Bible study you will attempt to obtain a fuller, more complete understanding of the possible nature of the Star of Bethlehem. It is hoped that you will take this opportunity to introduce yourself and your children to hermeneutics – the science of Biblical interpretation.

Begin your Bible study by reading and discussing with your children the various parts of the story surrounding the birth of Jesus. Read in turn each of the following Biblical passages:

**The Annunciation:** Luke 1:26-35, Make the point that Jesus was born of Mary. Jesus is the word incarnate. This is why we call Mary mother of God.

**The Nativity:** Luke 2:1-7, Jesus humbled Himself by becoming man. He became man that he might save us from our sins.

**The Shepherds:** Luke 2:8-20, Jesus is God and the angels give testimony to this fact by calling the shepherds.

**The Magi and the Star:** Matthew 2:1-12. The Magi (often called the Wise Men) humbled themselves before the new born king. They offered him gifts of gold (because he was a king), frankincense (because he was God), and myrrh (because he was to die for our sins).

The Magi followed a "star". What were the attributes of this star? Reread the above passage paying particular attention to the following:

- 1) the "star" was first seen in the eastern sky
- 2) the "star" had a message
- 3) the "star" had a leading action
- 4) the "star" was not visible to Herod, chief priest, or scribes
- 5) the "star" disappeared upon the Magi's arrival in Jerusalem
- 6) the "star" reappears upon the Magi's exit from Jerusalem
- 7) the "star" causes great rejoicing at its reappearance
- 8) the "star" went and stood over where the young child was

What might this star have been? Astronomers have suggested the following physical possibilities:

- 1) the Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights
- 2) comet
- 3) bright meteor

- 4) exploding star
- 5) a gathering of planets which may have had astrological meaning

Discuss the nature of these suggestions. Ask how each might or might not satisfy the above criteria. Might your children suggest other possibilities? Discuss the possibility of the story being a complete fabrication. Consider eyewitness accounts, familiarity of Gospel writers with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Talk about truthfulness of the Gospel writers. Discuss how Canon of the Bible was established based up accepted usage.

Go back and reread the story of the shepherds. This time pay particular attention to the words "the Glory of the Lord" in verse 9. What is the "Glory of the Lord"? Begin a study of the Old Testament usage of the term "**Glory of the Lord**". Examine the following passage:

Exodus 40:34-35

The "Gory of the Lord" is synonymous with the Old Testament manifestation of God's presence (light, fire, cloud, rushing wind, thunder). We can recall these manifestations in the fire, cloud, and thunder surrounding Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments from the hand of God, and in the fire of the burning bush when Moses was commissioned to set God's people free from the land of Egypt. Examine the following passages in the Old Testament and the surrounding text:

Genesis 15:17, Exodus 16:7-10, 34:29-35, Numbers 14:10-45, Deuteronomy 5:24, 1 Kings (a.k.a. I Samuel) 4:21-22, II Chronicles 7:1-3, Isaiah 4:5, 35:2. Ezekiel 1:28, 3:12, 8:6, 9:3. 10:4-19, 43:2, Habakkuk 3:3-4.

In addition to the appearance to the shepherds, the "Glory of the Lord" appears in the New Testament several other times. Who can forget the witness of the Father at Jesus' baptism, the blinding light of the transfiguration, the cloud of the Ascension, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, or the illuminating conversion of Saul? Read the following passages:

Baptism (Matthew 3:13-17), Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36), Ascension (Acts 1:19), Pentecost (Acts 2:1-3), Conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1-7)

There are numerous non-Biblical sources that also make direct reference to the Glory of the Lord being present at the birth of Jesus. These include statements such as that from the Protoevangelium of James which follows:

"Then a bright cloud overshadowed the cave. But (all) of a sudden the cloud became a great light in the cave so that their eyes could not bear it. But the light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared."

Other sources, such as the first Infancy Narrative and writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, refer to the "Glory of the Lord" in their treatment of the story of Jesus' birth.

What was the Star of Bethlehem? Perhaps we will never know. But we shouldn't ignore the fact that interpreting the Star of Bethlehem as the Glory of the Lord adds greater depth, meaning, and understanding to the Christmas story.

What human father would fail to be present at the birth of his child were it within possibility? Can we expect any less from God the Father?