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# Messianic Perspectives®

*God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.*

## THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

BY GARY HEDRICK

When [the Magi] heard the king, they departed;  
and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them,  
till it came and stood over where the young Child was.  
When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Matthew 2:9-10

Contrary to what some people think, the New Testament (NT) is NOT a dry, dusty, and depressing book, full of condemnation and negativism. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth! Its theme is “good news” and its opening pages are devoted to the story of a party—and a birthday party, at that!<sup>1</sup>

## A Time for Great Joy

We’re talking about the Gospel According to Matthew, of course. It begins with the celebration of a birth. A very special Baby was about to be born in Israel, and guests were invited from as far away as Persia and Babylon!

Who was this Baby, anyway? And why was His birth so special? After all, thousands of babies are born every hour of every day!

This birth was unique in a number of ways. First, it was a Virgin Birth.<sup>2</sup> Second, it was a royal birth.<sup>3</sup> And third, this birth was predicted centuries in advance. In the Jewish Scriptures (and in rabbinic tradition), this much-anticipated Messiah was a Jewish Deliverer who would someday appear on the scene to rescue Israel from her oppressors, sit on David’s throne, and fix our suffering, broken world.<sup>4</sup>

## Repairing a Broken World

Even if you’re not particularly interested in lofty predictions about kings and their thrones, the part about fixing the world should get your attention. After all, the world’s brokenness affects all of us every day of our lives. None of us is exempt.

Think about it. Every time we attend a funeral and try to comfort a grieving family, it’s a stark reminder that something is terribly wrong with this world. When our news services spew out non-stop accounts of conflict and bloodshed on virtually every continent, we sense instinctively that something has gone badly awry. Sweet little babies are born with genetic deformities and diseases while heart-broken parents look on helplessly. Evil tyrants prosper at the expense of the suffering masses. There is untold pain, violence, bloodshed, injustice, and hopelessness almost everywhere we look. Surely, a good and just God would never have created the world in such a pitiful and painful state.

It’s true—He wouldn’t have! And He didn’t. What God created in the beginning was a pristine paradise; but that ancient, idyllic world soon fell into its current, sad state through the rebellion of our first parents, Adam and Eve. They chose to believe Lucifer rather than God. Their tragic story is etched indelibly into the collective consciousness of the human race. In his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, Milton noted the cataclysmic consequences of Adam and Eve’s abuse of God’s gift of free will: “Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.”<sup>5</sup>

So the Creation was originally “very good” (Gen. 1:31), but was later polluted and contaminated by human sin (3:1-24). The Apostle Paul aptly describes our fallen world as “groaning” and suffering under the burden of a cosmic curse (Rom. 8:20-22). That’s why it needs to be fixed.



Angels announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds

Govaert Flinck



Joanni. Miltoni. Sculp. Tiepolo.

**Paradise Lost.**  
A  
**POEM**  
IN  
TWELVE BOOKS.

The Author  
**JOHN MILTON.**

The Third Edition.  
Revised and Augmented by the  
same Author.

LONDON,  
Printed by S. Simmons next door to the  
Golden Lion in Aldergate-Street, 1678.

Freely they  
stood who  
stood, and  
fell who fell.

John Milton  
*Paradise Lost*



M. Burg. sculp.

## Messianic Perspectives®

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## The Messianic Hope

As ancient as the curse is, however, Israel's Messianic hope is older—much older. In fact, the promise of Redemption predates the creation of Planet Earth! The NT tells us that God foreordained the coming of the Messiah to die for our sins even before the world came into existence (1 Peter 1:20). Long before the tragedy in Eden unfolded, God had already foreseen it and devised His response—a plan for salvation and reconciliation. It is first mentioned in Genesis 3:15:

*“And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her Seed;  
He shall bruise your head,  
And you shall bruise His heel.”*<sup>6</sup>

Adam and Eve evidently embraced this hope. They understood God's promise to mean that Eve was “the woman” who would give birth to a “Seed” who, in turn, would be instrumental in reversing the curse and its deleterious effects. Eve may have initially thought that her first son, Cain, was the promised Deliverer: *Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the LORD”* (Gen. 4:1).

*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*,<sup>7</sup> an ancient rabbinic commentary (written in Aramaic) provides confirmation when it amplifies the verse like this: “Adam knew Eve his wife, who desired the angel, and she conceived and bore Cain. And she said, ‘I have acquired a man, the angel of the Lord.’”<sup>8</sup>

So here's what Eve may have been thinking:

- God promised to send us a Deliverer (i.e., the Messiah);
- He said the Deliverer would be my [“the woman's”] Seed (a descendant);
- I just gave birth to Cain, so he could be the promised Deliverer.

The Targums don't have biblical authority, of course, because they are commentaries rather than actual Scripture. Nonetheless, they are immensely helpful because they show us how the ancient sages of Israel understood these passages. Sometimes their insights are surprisingly Messianic—and this is one of those times. According to the Targum, the promised Redeemer would be “the angel of the Lord”—a divine Emissary. If the Targum is on the right track here, it means that Eve made a connection between God's promise and the birth of her first son, Cain.<sup>9</sup>

## Messiah: the Desire of Women

From Eve to Miriam (Mary), countless generations of Jewish girls hoped and prayed that they would be chosen to give birth to the promised Redeemer of Israel.

No wonder the angel's message to Miriam was so extraordinary. After millennia of countless women waiting and hoping, she was going to be the one! She would be the mother of the Messiah! *And having come in, the angel said to [Miriam], “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”* (Luke 1:28).

That's the reason for this party at the beginning of the NT. The long-awaited Redeemer was about to be born. The “first coming” promises were about to be fulfilled. The first phase of Israel's redemption (*geulah*) was about to be realized. It was a time for rejoicing!

Luke recounts this resplendent scene of jubilant celebration: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”* (2:13-14).

As far as we know, this was the only birthday ever to be celebrated both on earth and also in Heaven. Lowly shepherds and majestic angels rejoiced together.



The Annunciation

Fra Angelico

## Who Were the Wise Men?

Sometime after He was born, Matthew tells us that certain Wise Men<sup>10</sup> arrived “from the East” to visit the Child: *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him”* (2:1-2).

The Bible doesn’t tell us where the Wise Men were from. However, logic dictates that they would have been from either Babylon (modern Iraq) or its neighbor, Persia (Iran). The site of ancient Babylon survives near the modern city of Hillah—almost 750 miles due east of Jerusalem. So these visitors from the East may well have been pagan priests (or astrologers/astronomers)<sup>11</sup> who made the long trek from Babylon or Persia, traversed the Arabian Desert, and then went up to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

Another possibility is that they were Jewish scholars and/or scientists who lived in the exiled community in Babylon and made the trip so they could pay their respects to the newborn King-Messiah of Israel. Whoever they were, they probably traveled for most of their journey with trade caravans that were headed in the same westerly direction.<sup>13</sup>

## How Did They Know About the Messiah’s Birth?

Examining the text, one can’t help noticing that the Wise Men had learned a great deal about the Messiah. For instance, they knew:

- When He would be born (in their day; i.e., the first century);
- Where He would be born (Israel);
- That He would come from the Jewish royal lineage (“king of the Jews”);
- That He was worthy of worship and adoration

Perhaps even more importantly, these Wise Men were willing to translate all of that knowledge into action! We all know people who possess a great deal of “head knowledge,” but never seem to get around to doing anything of significance with it. They’re good at talking the talk, but not so good at walking the walk! But that wasn’t the case with the Wise Men.

Just think what a disruption this trip was for them. They were no doubt prominent, busy men in their hometown(s). They must have had families, pursuits, routines, and responsibilities; yet they were willing to put it all aside so they could make the long, difficult trek to Jerusalem to worship the newborn King! They weren’t just paying Him lip service.

# Keeping It Biblical

Not all tradition is bad. The Apostle Paul, for instance, told believers in Greece that they should only fellowship with people who walk according to the tradition received from the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6). Traditions are beliefs and customs that are passed down from one generation to another (the Greek word used in the NT is *paradosis*, which means to “give over” or to “pass along”). The Bible generally uses the term “tradition” to mean ways in which Scriptural teachings are applied in our daily lives. The problem is that in the process of transmission from one generation to another, traditions can stray from the original meaning and intent of Scripture.

A good tradition, then, is one that has solid Scriptural support. A bad tradition is one that doesn’t. Yeshua routinely took the P’rushim (Pharisees) to task because so many of their man-made traditions had little in the way of biblical support. Even worse, there were times when their traditions had become so twisted, they actually contradicted Scripture (e.g., Matt. 15:1-9). On the other hand, though, the Lord also pointed out instances where He believed their traditions should be observed (e.g., 23:1-5). So He wasn’t opposed to all traditions—only bad ones.

Unfortunately, once the story of Yeshua’s birth began to be transmitted from generation to generation, the beauty and simplicity of the biblical account was embellished with many fanciful legends and traditions. Here are some examples of how tradition has altered the narrative:

**The Bethlehem Star was east of where the Wise Men were.** Wrong. The Star was never to the east of them. It was to the west of where the Wise Men began their journey. When they said, “We have seen His star in the East” (2:2), they meant that they were in the East when they first saw it. The Star itself was toward the west.

**There were three Wise Men.** There could have been three of them, but the Bible nowhere says that. We don’t know how many there were. The tradition of there being three Wise Men probably arose from the three gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (v. 11). However, some ancient traditions say there were 12 magi.

**The Wise Men were kings.** A well-known Christmas carol says, “We three kings of Orient are / Bearing gifts we traverse afar,” but there is no indication in the biblical account that they were kings.

**The names of the Wise Men were Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar.**

Again, no. The Bible doesn’t provide any names. The notion that there were three—one from Persia, another from India, and a third from Arabia—is purely traditional (and most likely fanciful).

**The Wise Men visited the Baby who was lying in a manger in Bethlehem.**

Well, they tried to visit Him in Bethlehem; but by the time they arrived, He and his family had already returned home to Nazareth. That’s why Herod searched all over Bethlehem but couldn’t find Him (vv. 7-8). Most likely, the scene described in 2:11 took place at the family home in Nazareth when the Child was already one or two years of age. This could explain why Herod, after interviewing the Wise Men, ordered the execution of male children two years of age and younger in Bethlehem (v. 16). He must have had some reason to suspect that the Child could be two years of age by that time.

**The Wise Men were Gentiles.** The traditionalists could possibly be right about this one, but it’s far from a certainty. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, had imported thousands of Jewish people to Babylon five centuries earlier. And guess whom the king appointed to be in charge of “all the wise men of Babylon”? Daniel—a young Jewish man from Israel (Dan. 2:48)! So who’s to say there weren’t any Jewish Wise Men in the first century? Five centuries earlier, their boss was Jewish!

**The promised Child’s birth ushered in the Kingdom.** A popular Christmas hymn, Isaac Watts’ “Joy to the World,” begins with these words: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” For generations, it has been incorporated into celebrations of the Messiah’s birth. However, there’s not one word in it about Messiah’s first coming in Bethlehem. Watts wrote the lyrics (based on Psalm 98) as an anthem about the glorious Second Coming (not the first coming) and the ensuing Millennial Kingdom when the curse will be reversed. The third verse goes like this:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

So how did they know who the Messiah was? How did they know the star pointed to Him?

The answer to those questions takes us even further back in time—to 586 BC, in fact—centuries before Yeshua (Jesus) was born. That’s when the Babylonians invaded Israel, destroyed Jerusalem, and took tens of thousands of Jewish people back to Babylon as captives. Even after the Persians released the Jewish captives 70 or so years later, most of the Jews chose to remain in Babylon. By that time, the famous city had become a flourishing and vibrant center of Jewish culture and learning. Even today, 2,500 years later, the most widely-used version of the Jewish Talmud is *Bavli*—the Babylonian Talmud.

After being in captivity for seven decades, most of the Babylonian Jews had never seen Israel. Their children and grandchildren had been born in Babylon, and their parents were buried there—so it had become their home. They had everything they needed, so they saw no need to return to the Land of their ancestors.

That’s why, when Yeshua was born in Israel, a substantial Jewish community resided on the other side of the Arabian Desert in Babylon and Persia. There were yeshivas (Jewish schools) and synagogues in the region, where scholars would meet to share information with each other and to teach and mentor their followers. Babylon, in particular, was a major hub of Jewish life.

If the Wise Men were from this area, then (and most authorities believe they were), they were situated in an important center of Jewish learning and culture. Even if they weren’t Jewish themselves, they would have had access to Jewish sources of information about Messianic prophecy, as it was understood in those days.

## THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BABYLONIAN EXILE

By the rivers of Babylon,  
There we sat down, yea, we wept  
When we remembered Zion.

We hung our harps  
Upon the willows in the midst of it.

For there those who carried us away captive asked  
of us a song,  
And those who plundered us *requested* mirth,  
Saying, “Sing us *one* of the songs of Zion!”

How shall we sing the LORD’s song  
In a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand forget *its skill!*

If I do not remember you,  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—  
If I do not exalt Jerusalem  
Above my chief joy.

Psalm 137:1-6

## Waiting for Messiah

So if the Wise Men had studied with first century Jewish teachers, what might they have learned? Without question, they would have heard about the promised Deliverer. Even secular scholars readily acknowledge that by the first century, when these events took place, there was a growing expectation among the Jewish people that the Messiah was due to arrive.<sup>14</sup>

Some examples of first century Messianic fervor are preserved for us in the NT. For instance, it tells us about Simeon and Anna, two elderly, devout Jewish people who frequented the Jerusalem Temple in anticipation of Messiah’s arrival. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s [Messiah]” (2:26). So one day, the Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the Temple. When he got there, he saw Miriam and Yosef (Mary and Joseph) with the baby Yeshua. They had brought Him to the Temple 33 days after His circumcision to comply with the requirements of the Law.<sup>15</sup>

It’s easy to imagine Simeon seeing that little family, with the young mom holding her baby close in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of the Temple, and the Spirit whispering in his ear, “Simeon, there He is! He’s the One you’ve been waiting for!” Then the old man slowly but deliberately hobbles over to Miriam, casts his walking stick aside, sweeps the Baby up in his arms, and holds Him up to God. Can you imagine how surprised and amazed Miriam must have been? But she sensed that something incredible was happening, so she let the old man take her Baby! Then, thrusting the tiny bundle up over his head, Simeon cried out:

“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,  
According to Your word;  
For my eyes have seen Your salvation  
Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,  
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,  
And the glory of Your people Israel.”

Luke 2:29-32

Now the old man could die happy. He had seen the Messiah! He knew God had kept His promise, so he could depart in peace.

Anna, an 84 year-old widow who was a prophetess from the tribe of Asher, fasted and prayed in the Temple court “day and night.” She, too, gave thanks to God when she saw the Baby (vv. 36-38).

Leading up to the first century, then, there was a swelling tide of Messianic anticipation among the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup> Even in the wake of an earlier, failed Messianic insurrection (the Bar Kochba revolt, explained later in this article), the people were anxious to throw off the yoke of Roman bondage. No doubt the Jewish community in Babylon (which was by then under Parthian rule) was aware of these Messianic hopes and aspirations. The scholarly community may also have taken note of Daniel’s prophecy that Messiah would appear in the first century, nearly 500 years after the command to rebuild Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25-26).<sup>17</sup> So it’s reasonable to assume that the Wise Men (assuming they were from Babylon or nearby Persia) could easily have known about Israel’s Messianic hope.

## What the Wise Men Could Have Learned From the Jewish Scriptures

Here are some of Mary Fairchild's "44 Prophecies of the Messiah" that were fulfilled in Yeshua of Nazareth:

Prophecies About Jesus	Old Testament Scripture	New Testament Fulfillment
Messiah would be born of a woman.	Genesis 3:15	Matthew 1:20 Galatians 4:4
Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.	Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:1 Luke 2:4-6
Messiah would be born of a virgin.	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:22-23 Luke 1:26-31
Messiah would come from the line of Abraham.	Genesis 12:3 Genesis 22:18	Matthew 1:1 Romans 9:5
Messiah would be a descendant of Isaac.	Genesis 17:19 Genesis 21:12	Luke 3:34
Messiah would be a descendant of Jacob.	Numbers 24:17	Matthew 1:2
Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah.	Genesis 49:10	Luke 3:33 Hebrews 7:14
Messiah would be heir to King David's throne.	2 Samuel 7:12-13 Isaiah 9:7	Luke 1:32-33 Romans 1:3
Messiah's throne will be anointed and eternal.	Psalms 45:6-7 Daniel 2:44	Luke 1:33 Hebrews 1:8-12
Messiah would be called Immanuel.	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:23
Messiah would spend a season in Egypt.	Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:14-15
A massacre of children would happen at Messiah's birthplace.	Jeremiah 31:15	Matthew 2:16-18
A messenger would prepare the way for Messiah.	Isaiah 40:3-5	Luke 3:3-6
Messiah would be rejected by his own people.	Psalms 69:8 Isaiah 53:3	John 1:11 John 7:5
Messiah would be preceded by Elijah.	Malachi 4:5-6	Matthew 11:13-14
Messiah would be declared the Son of God.	Psalms 2:7	Matthew 3:16-17
Messiah would be called a Nazarene.	Isaiah 11:1	Matthew 2:23
Messiah would bring light to Galilee.	Isaiah 9:1-2	Matthew 4:13-16
Messiah would be sent to heal the brokenhearted.	Isaiah 61:1-2	Luke 4:18-19
Messiah would be a priest after the order of Melchizedek.	Psalms 110:4	Hebrews 5:5-6
Messiah would be called King.	Psalms 2:6 Zechariah 9:9	Matthew 27:37 Mark 11:7-11
Messiah would be praised by little children.	Psalms 8:2	Matthew 21:16
Messiah would be betrayed.	Psalms 41:9 Zechariah 11:12-13	Luke 22:47-48 Matthew 26:14-16
Messiah's price money would be used to buy a potter's field.	Zechariah 11:12-13	Matthew 27:9-10
Messiah would be falsely accused.	Psalms 35:11	Mark 14:57-58
Messiah would be silent before his accusers.	Isaiah 53:7	Mark 15:4-5
Messiah would be spat upon and struck.	Isaiah 50:6	Matthew 26:67
Messiah would be a sacrifice for sin.	Isaiah 53:5-12	Romans 5:6-8

—Adapted from "Prophecies Jesus Fulfilled" by Mary Fairchild  
[<http://christianity.about.com/od/biblefactsandlists/a/Prophecies-Jesus.htm>]

## When Is a Star Really a Star?

We all know what a star is. Or do we? As it turns out, it's not necessarily a literal star. *The English Free Dictionary* defines a "star" as either "a self-luminous celestial body consisting of a mass of gas held together by its own gravity. . ." or "something regarded as resembling such a celestial body."<sup>18</sup>

In English usage, then, a star can be either a burning astral mass of gas or some other type of object in the sky that resembles one. The same principle would apply in virtually any language, including Greek and Hebrew. That is, the word can apply either to an actual star or some other object overhead that looks like one. There are instances in Scripture where the word "star" isn't used literally (e.g., Job 38:7, Jude 13).

The Bible says this particular star moved on ahead of the Wise Men, leading them in a westerly direction, until "it came and stood over where the young Child was" (Matt. 2:9).<sup>19</sup> Since this shining phenomenon didn't behave like an ordinary star, it couldn't have been a star in any ordinary sense of the word.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever it was, the Star of Bethlehem led these Wise Men to their destination in Israel—a distance of roughly 750 miles. They could easily see the Star from their vantage point on the ground. Was it also visible during the daylight hours? The NT doesn't tell us. Maybe the caravan only traveled at night to avoid the daytime temperatures of 115 degrees Fahrenheit or more in the sizzling Arabian Desert.

Around 1,400 years earlier, a "star," of sorts, had also guided the children of Israel through the wilderness. The Bible describes a "pillar of fire" in the sky that went before the Israelites at night and appeared as a "cloud" during the day (Ex. 13:21). In that instance, the pillar of fire was the burning, shining Presence of God—the glory of the LORD.<sup>21</sup>

Could the Star of Bethlehem have been this same, radiant Presence of God? We believe this is a possibility with much to commend it.

And if it's true that this Star of Bethlehem in the NT was the pillar of fire in Exodus, it provides a striking bit of symmetry between the OT and the NT. The same radiant Presence of God that led the children of Israel from Egypt back to Canaan also led the Wise Men from Babylon (or wherever they were) back to Israel.

# THE BETHLEHEM STAR: LOCALIZED MIRACLE OR NATURAL PHENOMENON?

Some people (even a few evangelicals) like to look for naturalistic explanations for the biblical miracles. For instance, various Bible interpreters and archaeologists have proposed theories about how the crossing of the Red Sea (as recorded in the Book of Exodus) could have been accomplished without a supernatural dividing of the waters (like the suggestion that Israel took advantage of an underwater land bridge the Egyptians didn't know about so they could cross in ankle-deep water).<sup>1</sup>

Some of the explanations proposed for the Bethlehem Star include:

- It was a comet. A bright comet was reported in Capricorn around 5 BC. Computer simulations have shown that it would have appeared low in the sky from a vantage point in Jerusalem. Another possibility is the famous Halley's Comet, which may also have been visible.
- It was a planetary conjunction. Around 4 BC (roughly the time of Yeshua's birth), Jupiter (the largest of the planets) completed a retrograde loop in the vicinity of Regulus in the constellation Leo. Since the Magi were observers of the stars, the idea is that this rare conjunction of objects in the sky would have gotten their attention.
- It was a supernova. During this same period, astronomers in the Far East reported a bright "new star" in the constellation Aquila. This may have been what we call today a "supernova."<sup>2</sup>

The problem with explanations like these is that Matthew seems to indicate that the star moved along the route as it led the Magi toward Jerusalem. The text says it "went before them, till it came and stood over where the Child was" (Matt. 2:9).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the larger and more important issue is: Do we really need comets, conjunctions, and other astronomical phenomena to explain the Bethlehem Star?

Why not let the Bible speak for itself and simply accept the supernatural aspects of the narrative at face value? Whether it's the supernatural dividing of the Red Sea so Israel could walk across the sea bed on dry ground; Yeshua walking on water or raising the dead; Elijah making the sun stand still; Peter and John healing a cripple; or Elijah calling fire down from heaven—none of these things challenges God's power in any significant way.

More importantly, isn't it a bit of a contradiction when those of us who say we believe in God and His word doubt the plausibility of the biblical miracles? Believing in miracles doesn't mean we think we live in a magical world where God is like a heavenly butler who's on call 24/7 for our convenience. What it does mean, though, is that we believe God can and does perform miracles (i.e., interventions that require the temporary suspension of natural laws) when He determines that it's necessary for the accomplishment of His purposes.

The Bethlehem Star burned brightly in the night sky; but unlike an astronomical star, it moved toward the west until it stopped and hovered over their destination in Israel.<sup>4</sup> It certainly sounds like a localized, supernatural act of God (similar to Israel's pillar of fire in the Book of Exodus) rather than a universal, astronomical phenomenon. The star was leading these visitors from afar to the place where they could worship the Child and bring Him gifts. There is simply no need to look for a naturalistic or rationalistic explanation for it.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James Cameron (of Titanic fame) produced a 2006 documentary entitled *The Exodus Decoded* suggesting that the plagues in Egypt, as well as the crossing of the Red Sea, were all the natural result of atmospheric and oceanic conditions following a catastrophic volcanic eruption off the coast of Greece around 1500 BC. This is just one example of how creative people can be when they're trying to remove miracles from the equation.

<sup>2</sup>For other possibilities, see "Star of Bethlehem: Top 4 Celestial Suspects" (Dec. 24, 2013) on the Discovery Channel's online "News" page (news.discovery.com).

<sup>3</sup>"The behavior of the star after the Magi had consulted Herod (it 'went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was,' v. 9) best fits some localized supernatural phenomenon, though some have suggested ways of interpreting this as an object at astronomical distances" (VanGemeren, W. [Ed.], *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997], 613).

<sup>4</sup>The star presumably stopped over the family home in Nazareth, where Joseph the carpenter lived with his family. The Baby would have only been in Bethlehem for a short time after His birth (because that wasn't Joseph and Mary's hometown). Again, the traditional portrayal of the three kings visiting the Baby in the Bethlehem manger is erroneous.

## How Did the Wise Men Connect the Dots?

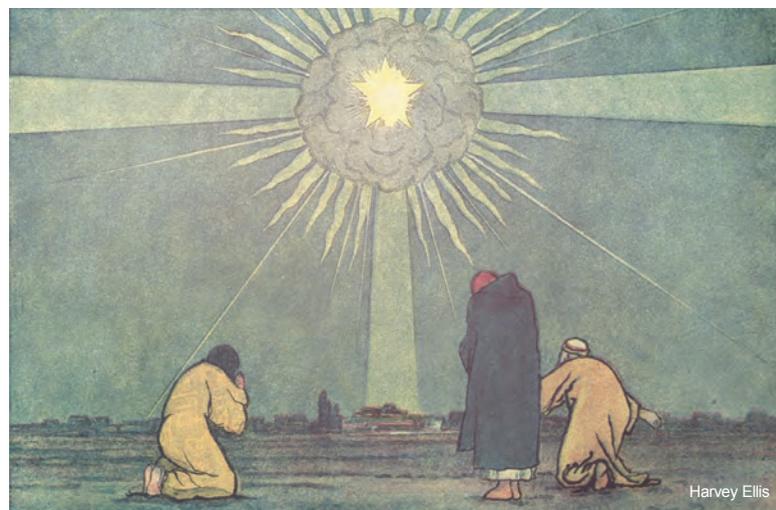
We already noted that in Babylon or Persia, the Wise Men would have had ready access to Jewish culture and learning. If they themselves were Jewish (contrary to Christian tradition, obviously, but nonetheless a very real possibility), it's even more likely that they were familiar with Jewish beliefs and writings of their time.

So if they tapped into the first century reservoir of Jewish knowledge and understanding, what would they have learned? As we already noted, they could have known about Daniel's prophecy pinpointing the first century as a time of great Messianic significance. But even if they did, Daniel didn't mention a star. So what else might have helped them figure out that the Bethlehem Star was a herald of the birth of the Messiah?

In the first place, the Jewish sages were quite familiar with the idea of a star pointing to the Messiah. Moses, in the Book of Numbers, records a series of mysterious prophecies uttered by a pagan prophet named Balaam. The fourth and final prophecy is clearly Messianic and includes this verse (24:17):

*"I see Him, but not now;  
I behold Him, but not near;  
A Star shall come out of Jacob;  
A Scepter shall rise out of Israel,  
And batter the brow of Moab,  
And destroy all the sons of tumult."  
Numbers 24:17*

During the Jewish rebellion against Rome (132-135 AD), many of the people embraced the military leader Simon ben Kosiba as their Messiah. His followers called him *Bar Kochba* ("Son of the Star"), a reference to Balaam's Messianic prophecy. With the rebellion's initial success, Simon was hailed as a hero and coins were struck in his honor commemorating "year one" and "year two" of Israel's redemption.<sup>22</sup> Later, however, when the rebellion collapsed and it became painfully evident that he wasn't the Messiah, his disillusioned followers renamed him *Bar Koziba* ("Son of the Lie").<sup>23</sup>



## Born Under a Star

According to Jewish tradition, a star appeared in the sky over the place where Abraham was born some 4,000 years ago.<sup>24</sup> So for the sages of Israel, a star appearing in the sky to mark the birth of an important figure was a familiar concept.

One of the prominent features of the Hebrew Bible is its frequent parallelism—and it helps us interpret Numbers 24:17. Since the Star and the scepter appear in parallel, they both symbolize the same person. If the scepter, a symbol of rulership, points to Israel's King-Messiah,<sup>25</sup> then that means the Star does, as well.

So a familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and the interpretations of the sages would have helped the Wise Men identify the star and decipher its meaning.

However, even aside from their having a working knowledge of Jewish beliefs and sources, I can't help thinking that God himself played the greater role in helping them put the pieces of the puzzle together. Yes, they lived in a country where they would have had access to Jewish academia; and yes, the Balaam prophecy makes a clear connection between the Messiah and His star. That's all true.

But what if the real key to this story about the journey of the Wise Men is beyond any rational human explanation? What if these prominent men from the East were waiting on the Lord and trusting Him for guidance—and He helped them because He saw the sincerity of their hearts and heard their prayers? Maybe they weren't as dependent on commentaries and Targums as we might think.

God knew they were willing to go as far as they needed to go in order to find the Child. Before the Wise Men left home, they didn't know how far they would be traveling. They didn't know how long they would be gone—or even if they would ever return from their journey. But none of those considerations deterred them. All they cared about was having an opportunity to see the Messiah and worship Him.

Their humility, devotion, and desire to see the newborn King must surely have touched God's heart. So He prompted them, guided them, protected them, and made sure they arrived at their destination—and chances are, we'll see them in Heaven someday.

We see the Messianic star one final time at the close of the Book of Revelation. The Lord says, "*I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star*" (22:16).<sup>26</sup>

## We're Here to Help!

If we can assist you in your spiritual journey, whether it's by praying for you or by providing free, helpful printed materials, please contact us at [info@cjfm.org](mailto:info@cjfm.org) or (800) 926-5397.

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Then the next verse says, *And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely* (v. 17).

What an amazing thought! The same God who led those Wise Men to His Son all those many centuries ago still invites us to come to Him. The invitation is just as open today as it was 2,000 years ago! And it's for Jew and Gentile alike.

If you've never placed your faith in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, what better way to begin the New Year than by coming to Him in faith and becoming a child of God? You've heard the invitation, my friend. Now the next step is up to you!



Dr. Gary Hedrick  
is president of  
CJF Ministries.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The English word "gospel" translates the Greek *euangellion* (lit., "good news" or "good message"). So *The Gospel According to Matthew* could be called *The Good News According to Matthew*. The message of salvation through faith in Messiah Yeshua is good news!

<sup>2</sup>A technical term that's sometimes used for the virgin birth is *parthenogenesis*, denoting asexual reproduction in which conception occurs without fertilization. However, in the biblical Virgin Birth (capitalized here because it refers to a distinct, specific event), conception occurred through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 7:14, Luke 1:34-35). God himself provided the genetic material that would have normally been contributed by the biological father.

<sup>3</sup>This Baby was the Messiah, a direct descendant of King David of Israel (Matt. 1:1ff).

<sup>4</sup>The principle of *tikkun olam* (Heb., "repairing [the] world") has a prominent place in rabbinic thinking. It acknowledges the tragic brokenness of the world and calls on the People of Israel to be God's instruments to repair it.

<sup>5</sup>John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Book 3, line 102).

<sup>6</sup>Theologians call Genesis 3:15 the Protoevangelium (lit., the "first gospel") because it's the first time God's Plan of Redemption is mentioned in the Bible.

<sup>7</sup>Cathcart, K., Maher, M., and McNamara, M. (Eds.), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, Vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>*Editio princeps of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (Venice edition, 1598).

<sup>9</sup>For more musings on this topic, see "Eve's Messianic Expectations" by Eddie Bromfield (Oct. 24, 2009) at *Smoodock's Blog* (<http://smoodock45.wordpress.com>).

<sup>10</sup>The King James Version correctly says these visitors from the East were "wise men." The Greek word is *magoi* (plural of *magos*)—or in English, magi. It was a general term for many types of "wise men," including scholars, astrologers/ astronomers, soothsayers, interpreters of dreams, priests, healers, royal advisors, and a few others. The fact that these men from the East had taken their cue from a star they observed in the sky could indicate that astrology/astronomy was their primary area of interest. Also, contrary to tradition, the Bible doesn't say they were kings—or that there were three of them. The tradition that there were three Magi probably arose from the fact that they brought three types of gifts (Matt. 2:11); but in reality we don't know how many of them there were.

<sup>11</sup>The distinction between astrologers and astronomers is a modern one. In the ancient world, where the pagan masses believed that their gods revealed secrets through the stars, the two were indistinct.

<sup>12</sup>J.D. Douglas (Ed.), *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 765.

<sup>13</sup>Lone travelers on ancient trade routes were "ripe picking" for bandits and thieves, so it was a common practice in ancient times to hitch a ride with a larger caravan.

<sup>14</sup>In Volume 1, Chapter 9 ("4QMMT and the Benediction Against the Minim") of *Judaism of the Second Temple Period* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007), the late professor David Flusser of Hebrew University explains that "the [Jewish] yearning for a personal messiah" didn't reach its crescendo until the late Second Temple Period in the first century (110).

<sup>15</sup>The Child would have been born 40 days earlier. He was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21) and then He was presented in the Temple 33 days later—a total of 40 days, counting inclusively. There they offered the purification offering for their firstborn son (Lev. 12:3-6). Incidentally, their offering (i.e., two turtledoves or pigeons) was the one that was prescribed for people of limited means. (Note that God didn't want anyone to be excluded because they couldn't afford a sacrifice.) So Yeshua was born into a poor family.

<sup>16</sup>The rise of other Messianic claimants at around the same time as Yeshua reinforces this point. Examples are Judas, son of Hezekiah (4 BC), Simon of Peraea (4 BC), Athronges the shepherd (4 BC), and Judas the Galilean (6 BC), among others.

<sup>17</sup>For obvious reasons, traditional Jewish interpreters have an aversion to the Yeshua (Jesus) connection in Daniel 9:25-27. They distinguish between the "anointed one" and the "anointed leader" in these verses and see both figures as finding their fulfillment in ancient times by either Zerubbabel or one or more of the high priests. One wonders, however, how much of the traditional, rabbinic view may be a knee-jerk reaction to Christian claims about the same prophecy. For an abbreviated overview of the rabbinic interpretation, see *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1661.

<sup>18</sup>*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) online edition at [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com).

<sup>19</sup>Their route was actually not quite so direct. First, the star led the Wise Men westward to Jerusalem (where they had their encounter with King Herod); then it changed course and led them northward from Jerusalem to Nazareth, where they finally saw the Child (Matt. 2:9-10). Why didn't it lead them straight to Nazareth? Evidently, God (for whatever reason) was putting Herod (a puppet of Rome) on notice that the rightful, true King of Israel had been born.

<sup>20</sup>The closest star to the earth is our sun. The next closest is Proxima Centauri in the constellation Centaurus—a little over four light years from our sun. Neither of these gaseous bodies is a suitable candidate for the Star of Bethlehem.

<sup>21</sup>In Exodus 14, the terms "pillar of God" and "the angel of God" appear to be closely related. They both went before Israel in the wilderness to guide them (vv. 19-23). A chapter earlier, Moses says, "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night" (13:21). Here, the Lord is "in" the fiery pillar. It's reasonably clear, then, that this was the Shekinah, the holy Presence of God. It was the same cloud that dwelt over the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. In Messianic (Jewish-Christian) theology, the "glory" (Heb., *kavod*) of God is roughly equivalent to both the Holy Spirit (*Ruach HaKodesh*) and the *Shekinah* (a term that comes from Jewish traditional writings and doesn't appear in the Bible; from the Hebrew word for "dwell"—hence, God's manifestation when He dwells with man). Note the string of associations and equivalencies: Pillar of Fire = Angel of GOD = Shekinah = Glory of God = Holy Spirit. Talmudic Judaism and the Zohar have a different take on the Shekinah.

<sup>22</sup>In ancient Jewish sources, the time of Israel's "redemption" (Heb., *geulah*) points to the end-time Messianic Age or "times of the Messiah" (*yemot haMashiach*)—roughly the same concept as the Millennial Kingdom in Christian eschatology. In Jewish eschatology, Messiah arrives at "the end of days" (*acharit hayamim*). His coming follows a time of severe trouble on the earth (*chevlei haMashiach*, "birthpangs of the Messiah"). Finally, the "present age" (*olam hazeh*) gives way to the promised "world to come" (*olam haba*).

<sup>23</sup>For more information about the second century Bar Kochba rebellion and its connection to the Balaam prophecy, see "Messianic Claimants: Simon ben Kosiba" by Jona Lendering at the Livius website ([www.livius.org](http://www.livius.org)).

<sup>24</sup>Ronald Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 615.

<sup>25</sup>The rightful ruler of Israel is her King Messiah, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah:

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,  
Until Shiloh comes;  
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people* (Gen. 49:10).

Compare 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

<sup>26</sup>The "root and offspring of David" is a Messianic title that comes from Isaiah 11. Note that in the context of this chapter in Isaiah, the Messiah is a descendant of King David who will usher in a semi-utopian age during which the world will be transformed and "the lion shall eat straw like an ox" (v. 7c).

# Fruit from the Harvest

by Violette Berger



## Lost and Found

As a guest speaker at a church in Indiana, **CJFM Area Director, Michael Campo (Chicago)** chose Genesis 16 as his text. Sarai was unable to conceive with her husband, Abram, and took her Egyptian maid, Hagar, and gave her to Abram as his wife. Hagar conceived, and Sarai “was despised in her sight.” Abram told Sarai that Hagar was in her power and “to do with her what is good in your sight.” Sarai then treated her harshly, and Hagar fled from her presence. But the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness and told her why she should return and submit to Sarai’s authority. Hagar “called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees.’” Michael emphasized how “the angel of the Lord is *always* looking to find somebody, just as He found Hagar in the wilderness.” He proceeded to explain the message of the Gospel. Following an altar call at the end of the service, seven people came forward and prayed to the “God who Sees” for their salvation. Mike adds, “God *found* them!”

## Picture Perfect

**Michelle Beadle, CJFM Southeast Representative (New Orleans)** was given some contact information by her son-in-law, a messianic rabbi who leads a congregation in Los Angeles. The elderly Jewish man she was asked to get in touch with was battling cancer. He had watched a TV documentary titled *The Miracle of Israel*, which was produced by a Messianic Jewish organization, and had called in to request a book on the same subject. During Michelle’s first conversation with him, he related an experience he had as a young man. He was climbing a mountain, and when he reached the top, he was very surprised to see a cross at the top, but didn’t think too much about it. However, when he reached the bottom of the mountain, he saw a piece of paper on the ground and picked it up. “It happened to be a picture of Yeshua, and he wondered if this was a sign from God.” Michelle writes, “Needless to say, he was very open to talking about Him, and after only three phone conversations, he prayed to receive Yeshua as his Messiah.” Michelle met him in person when she went to Los Angeles and invited him to attend services at her son-in-law’s Messianic congregation, which he did, and even invited family and friends to attend with him. He plans to attend regularly, and he and Michelle continue to remain in touch by phone, as she proclaims, “What a blessing!”

## God’s Grace

**Barry Berger, CJFM Director of Missions Emeritus (Phoenix)** shares his faith with most people he meets. He recently met a woman who is a representative of a near-by care giving group. They spoke for a while, and Barry discerned that she did not know the Lord. As he began witnessing to her, she became very enthused to hear more. Barry obliged, sharing different passages in the Scriptures with her. Following their conversation, Barry asked if she would like to pray with him to receive Jesus as her personal Savior and Lord of her life. She gladly agreed, and “Maria” is now Barry’s sister in the Lord, through the grace of God.

## From Translation to Transformation

**Peter Parkas, CJFM Northeast Representative (New Jersey)** recently had the privilege of sharing his testimony at a Hispanic church. The associate pastor, who is also the senior pastor’s son, translated the message into Spanish. Peter described his years of living on the streets as a homeless drug addict. However, one desperate day, in God’s perfect timing, someone shared the Gospel message with him. Peter listened closely, recognized his need, and prayed to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior. God mercifully transformed him into a *new* man in the Messiah (2 Cor. 5:17). Peter aptly calls it his “*Rags to Riches in Christ*” message. An altar call was given at the end of the message, and three young adults were moved to come forward, desiring the same transforming power of God in their lives. All three tearfully prayed a simple prayer of faith.

“Glory in His holy name; Let the heart of those who seek the Lord be glad” (Psalm 105:3).

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# Bible Questions AND Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

## Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at [garyh@cjfm.org](mailto:garyh@cjfm.org), or mail it to 611 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78215.

You may see your question addressed in a future issue of *Messianic Perspectives*.

**QUESTION:** Do you believe in the “once saved, always saved” doctrine?

**ANSWER:** Yes, but that terminology needs to be qualified—and here’s why. If by “once saved, always saved,” you mean that a person can repeat a “sinner’s prayer” and then go right back to a life of sin and wickedness, as if nothing has changed, and still have assurance of his or her salvation—then no, that’s not what I believe. The Bible teaches nothing of the sort.

On the other hand, if by “once saved, always saved,” you mean that once someone has been genuinely regenerated, God will continue His work in that person and carry it on to completion—then yes, that is what I believe. I believe it because that’s what the Bible says: *Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ* (Phil. 1:6).

This verse points us to what I call “the three C’s of eternal security.” Paul says here that our *confidence* should be in God, who *commenced* a good work in us and will *complete* it until the Lord Jesus returns. Note that he says it’s God’s work, not ours. Our confidence is in Him, not in ourselves, because He’s the one performing the action here, not us. And God always finishes what He starts! Paul declares emphatically that He will (not might, or may, or possibly could, but definitely will) finish the work He has begun in us. There is no doubt about it!

Here’s a brief summary of what the Bible teaches about the eternal security of the believer:

1. *Once you become God’s child, you possess that status permanently.* The Lord himself used the biological process of birth as an analogy for what happens the moment someone believes in Him (John 3:3-7). Much like a baby is born (physically) into a family, we are born (spiritually) into the Family of God when we trust in the Messiah (cp. 1:12-13). A child possesses his parents’ DNA and the result is a resemblance between them; and similarly, as God’s children, we bear a likeness, in a spiritual sense, to Him (Rom. 8:29). (For instance, we grow to love the things that He loves and to despise the things that He despises.) One important corollary of the birth analogy is the irrevocable nature of family relationships. That is, once a child is born, he is always the parents’ offspring. He cannot be “unborn” and his DNA cannot be changed. Earlier in the same chapter, Paul uses the term “adoption” to describe our relationship to God once we believe in the Messiah (v. 15). That is, God adopts us at the moment of salvation and we receive all of the rights and privileges of adult offspring.
2. *Once you become God’s child, you’re a “new creation.”* The Bible says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new* (2 Cor. 5:17). What a wonderful thought! *Justification* (the initial step in salvation when we trust the Lord Jesus and God declares us righteous because His righteousness

has been imputed to us) happens instantaneously; *sanctification*, however, is a lifelong process of being conformed by the Spirit of the Messiah into the image of the Messiah for the glory of the Messiah. It doesn’t happen overnight. Sometimes progress is slow and we feel like we’re taking two steps backward for every single step forward. But over the long haul, there is progress as our practice (in real time) is conformed to our position (in eternity).

3. *Once you become God’s child, you’re still prone, at times, to sin.* I realize this is considered a grave error among our friends who believe in “entire sanctification” or perfectionism. Nonetheless, it’s what the Bible teaches: *If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us* (1 John 1:10). In the context of this passage, John is writing to believers, not unbelievers. In fact, John’s whole discussion here about the confession of a believer’s sins (vv. 7-10) doesn’t make any sense if we don’t have any sins to confess. So whether we like it or not, we don’t become perfect the moment we believe in the Lord Jesus. We will still stumble in our spiritual walk, and sometimes we might even fall. But by the grace of God, and with His help, we get back up and keep on going. And if we don’t—well, that leads us to our fourth point.
4. *Once you become God’s child, He will discipline you when you sin.* “*For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives*” (Heb. 12:6). Like an earthly father disciplines his children because he loves them, our heavenly Father disciplines us for the same reason (v. 7). In fact, discipline is in itself evidence that we belong to God (v. 8). If someone professes to be a believer, but he’s living in open, habitual sin with no evidence of divine discipline, then that means he was never truly a believer in the first place. He is a *professor*, but not a *possessor*. Even in the early Church, believers struggled to understand how people could make a profession of faith and then later defect from their ranks. Did these people lose their salvation? On the contrary, John’s explanation was that the defectors had never truly been believers: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us* (1 John 2:19).
5. *Once you become God’s child, you will want to obey Him.* The Lord Jesus said, “*If you love Me, keep My commandments*” (John 14:15). In Greek (the language of the NT), the word *peitho* can mean either “to be convinced” or “to obey,” depending on the case usage. In other words, the ancient Greeks understood that the concepts of belief and obedience are so closely intertwined, they can sometimes be expressed with the same word. It really does make sense because action is always preceded by belief; that is, I sit down in a chair because I believe it will hold me. Or I take a bite out of an apple because I believe it will taste good. Or (in the context of our present discussion) I obey the Lord because I believe He loves me and knows what’s best for me. 🙏

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