

Signs of the King's Coming

"The Sign of the Star"

Matthew 2:1-2, John 1:6-16
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INTRODUCTION

During Advent we've been paying attention to various signs that signaled the Messiah's arrival in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Some signs are more obvious ones: such as our Christmas Eve text, **"you will find the child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."** And some are less obvious: such as **"the sign of Bethlehem"** (recall our 1st message on Jesus' genealogy) or the messenger sign: **"the sign of angels and shepherds."**

Today we consider one more sign: **"the sign of the star."**

The story of the **Star** and **magi** or **wise men** properly belongs to *Epiphany*...

Advent: season of preparation—ready for Christmas

Christmas: the birth, the gift of the Son

Epiphany: the showing or manifestation (to Gentiles) (12 days..., 12th night)

The **Magi** or the Three Kings were learned men from the east, probably from Persia (modern Iran) who studied the stars. They were likely a combination of **astrologers** (*astral-logos*=message of the stars) and **astronomers** (*astral-nomos*=law or patterns of the stars). Matthew particularly wants his readers to know that they were **Gentiles** – that God revealed the Messiah to non-Jews.

What exactly was this **star**? There are several theories, *a supernova*, *a comet* or *a planetary conjunction*. The most intriguing theory proposes that three planets appeared together in the sky and were seen as a giant star.

The 17th century astronomer, Johannes Kepler, was perhaps the first to suggest the theory of a planetary conjunction as an astronomical explanation of the ancient star. **Jupiter** and **Saturn** are in conjunction once every 20 years. Much rarer is when **Mars** also passes close to the other two planets. Kepler saw this occur in October of 1604. He calculated that this happens every 805 years and that it had occurred in 6-7 B.C. (May/June, Sept/Oct & December).

The conjunction occurred in the zodiacal constellation of *Pisces* associated with the last days and with the Hebrews. Plus, Jupiter was associated with a world ruler and Saturn with Palestine. Although speculative, it's reasonable to see how Persian astrologers might have predicted from seeing "this star" that *a world ruler would appear in Palestine among the Hebrews for the last days.* Because this conjunction appeared with varying intensity over the course of several months we also can understand why the Magi might have followed it's pattern of appearing in the sky as they journeyed to Palestine, the place heralded by this strange cosmic light.

So what does the **star** signify and symbolize? Remember, a **sign** points to something else and a **symbol** is a representation of some reality.

As a sign it announced and revealed to the wise men (the Gentile Magi) God's mighty act in history in sending his Son. The star led them to the **child** even as a manger helped the shepherds find the **baby** (star as a **guiding light**)

As a symbol the STAR represents the LIGHT (glory light) cited in John's gospel:

*"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being {4} in him was life, and the life was the **light** of all people. {5} The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... **John 1:3-5**, (a **glory** light shines)*

"LIGHT" often represents **REVELATION** biblically. Revelation simply means "God revealing Himself; God showing Himself in Word and/or Deed." You can grasp this idea intuitively. Some things we cannot figure out...we are *"in the dark"* until we see, until we understand, until we are shown. When someone tells or shows us how something works--a computer, a machine, a math problem--we become enlightened. Finally we can "see" for ourselves...

Example: *puzzle vs. mystery* (a secret revealed; cf. John Leith)

The Star of Bethlehem is an example of what the theologians call **"natural revelation."** God shows Himself in Nature. People see the power of a storm or an earthquake and they sense the powerful hand of the Creator. We gaze at a sunset or a mountain vista and behold the beauty of the Creator's handiwork. Wise Men saw an unusual *"light in the heavens"* and they sought to interpret what kind of divine message was being sent.

Example: *cosmic sign* (cf. also *earthquake* at messiah's death & tomb in Matthew)

God's people also declare that God has revealed Himself in a special way through prophets and apostles. The theologians refer to the Scriptures as the source of **"special revelation."** It is special or particular because it was given not *"in general"* to everyone but in particular to the Hebrews and to the Church. God's people share God's revelation in what we call "bearing witness."

Finally, Christians believe God has revealed Himself supremely when He sent a Person, His Son into the world as Savior and Messiah. Hebrews 1 begins,

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, {2} but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. {3} He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being..."

God's revelation light is revealed in several ways but supremely we believe that it has shined in Jesus. He told his disciples, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Think of God's light as revealing God in two primary ways:

Light as revelatory source—a bright and shining light (GLORY light)

Jonathan Edwards: (A Divine and Supernatural Light)

And it (light) may be thus described: a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them thence arising. This spiritual light primarily consists in the former of these, *viz.*, a real sense and apprehension of the divine excellency of things revealed in the word of God... There is therefore in this spiritual light,

A true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion; a real sense of the excellency of God and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel. There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature than in other things;

Thus there is a difference between having an *opinion*, that God is holy and gracious, and having a *sense* of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness.

It is one thing to believe, understand, apprehend that GOD is good—and another thing to experience the reality that God has been good to me; that He loves *me* in spite of myself and that I am drawn to this light!

Light as revelatory illumination—(a GUIDING light). This light delivers us from darkness and being lost (**grace**).

Example: have you ever lost your electricity? Did you rely on candles and flashlights for light in order to see? God's GRACE does for us what we cannot do. Seeing the truth means seeing both our sinfulness and God's truth & beauty.

This light diagnoses us as sick and needy and unclean. This light tells us the truth about ourselves (that we are going the wrong way). Example: what do you see in a mirror? The good features and the dirty spots, the dimples and the pimples, the sparkling eyes and the bags under your eyes (my eyes)! And the light shows us **God's** good ways; "*The Way, the Truth and the Life.*"

2 Corinthians 4:6, "*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ.*"

Psalms 119:18: "*Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.*"

Jesus, the light of the world, is in the words of the carol (*Son of God; Love's Pure light*) and He is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us—showing us the Father. You might say that Jesus (*divine* Son of God) and Jesus (*human* son of Mary) is both the divine & supernatural light (we have beheld his glory) and he is the way God has

spoken that enables us to hear, the light enabling us to see and to believe. He is **light** both as source and illumination.

Light is more powerful than darkness. Light banishes darkness. You can test this with a simple experiment. Open the door between a lighted room and a dark one. Does the darkness rush into the lighted room and swallow up the light? Or does the light rush into the dark place and illumine it? Light shines and the darkness *CANNOT overcome it*.

The Christmas holiday has come and gone. Schools have taken a holiday but they are about to resume. Companies shut down and even most stores closed for a day. But now it is back to business as usual. And the trees and wreaths and ornaments are being put away (Epiphany signals putting away the decorations). But recall all those Christmas **lights that** were gleaming. Remember the candle-lights in the windows. And the candles in the advent wreath.

Those lights recall the ancient **star**. That is, they can remind Christian people of light both glorious and revelatory. They point to Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Who told his disciples, *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl/bushel. Instead they put it on its stand and gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

Our lives, our deeds and our carefully chosen words can reflect light from the glorious light that is Christ. We too can function as a *glory* light and a *guiding* light. Of course, our light is *reflected* light. Christ is the true light but we are called to shine or reflect his light in the world. How? Can you think of ways God calls you and uses you to shine?

A *Glory* light—pointing others to Christ! A *Guiding* light—showing people the way, the truth, the life. I’m thinking of God’s people shining: a crisis pregnancy center, Caritas, teaching someone to read, forgiving another, helping, healing...

Story (William Wilberforce 1807, Slave Trade Act)

And so we need a light that is not merely seasonal. A light that reveals truth and offers grace. An **eternal light**. A light that darkness cannot overcome-**EVER**. He is Jesus Christ, the light of the world.