

Birth of Christ

THE MAGI'S POINT OF VIEW

The Christmas story begins 2-3 years before Christ's birth. Conjunctions of the two planets Jupiter and Saturn occurred. These conjunctions took place in the constellation of Pisces on 5/29/7 BC, 9/29/7 BC and 12/4/7 BC.

The fact that the conjunctions took place would not have impressed the wise men of that age (they could easily predict them with their knowledge of the sciences). What might have impressed them were the astrological implications of the conjunctions. Jupiter was the star of the world ruler. Saturn was the star of Palestine. The constellation Pisces was the sign of the last days. This 'coincidence' did not go unnoticed by wise men from the 'east' [Ma.2:2].

Who were these wise men and how many were there?

We aren't told how many there were, but it appears that the 'magi' (wise men) were from Sheba (Southern Arabia) and Seba (?) and represented the kings of these two areas [Ps.72:10]. Some scholars believe that these magi were disciples of Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) (630-553 BC), the founder of a monotheistic religion in Persia.

The conjunctions apparently led these wise men to a study of the Hebrew scriptures and to its prophecies concerning Christ. Their study took over two years and made such an impression on them and the kings they advised that it convinced the kings to send them on the long journey bearing gifts to see the Christ. Such an in-depth study of the Old Testament and resulting commitment implies that these wise men were also familiar with the Gospel (as presented in the OT [i.e. Isa.45:22; 50:10; etc.]) and perhaps also saved.

As a result of their study they knew that:

1. The king's arrival would, somehow, be related to a star, or star like object [Num.24:17; Isa.60:3].
2. The king would be found in Israel, specifically in Bethlehem Ephratah [Micah 5:2] and born of the lineage of Jacob [Num.24:17,19].
3. The king would be a great conqueror [Num.24:17-19].
4. It was foretold that the kings of their areas would present gifts to this new king [Ps.72:10; Isa.60:3,9].
5. The king would be named "God with us" and would be born of a virgin [Isa.7:14].
6. That the new king would be raised in a plain and simple lifestyle [Isa.7:14; 53:2].
7. The king would reign over an everlasting kingdom of peace [Isa.9:6,7].
8. Tarshish is near present day Gibraltar. Its kings presented gifts, but did not do so at Christ's birth since they are not from the east (as required by Ma.2:2). This leaves Sheba and Seba.
9. The 'star', when it appeared, was not the bright star indicated on many Christmas cards. Rather, it was noticeable only to those who regularly studied the heavens (i.e. shepherds, astronomers, etc.). The Jewish scribes and other religious leaders would not have noticed the new star since they were forbidden from practicing astrology [Deut.18:9-14; 17:2-7; Isa.47:11-

15; Dan.2:1-12]. But it did signal the wise men that it was time to prepare to leave for the Holy Land with the new king's gifts.

The magi didn't 'follow' the star to Judea. They already knew where they were to go. They arrive in Judea after having first seen the star. As logic and protocol would dictate they went first to Jerusalem [Ma.2:1-2]. From a protocol standpoint they would announce their presence and purpose in Judea to its political leader. From a logical standpoint they could also take advantage of Jerusalem as the religious center of the area and seek information about this new king (with His obvious religious ties). Surely (?) the religious leaders could fill in the gaps in their understanding of the scriptures.

It is likely that as they made their way to Jerusalem they had ample opportunity to talk to people they encountered. They may have heard the same things that were later reported by Josephus (that Herod was a cruel tyrant, vast murderer, torturer, killer of noble families and that he ruled "like a wild beast"). By the time they reached Jerusalem they already had a good idea of what to expect from Herod and the religious leaders. This would mean a little preplanning. Just to be on the safe side they would plan to arrive at Herod's palace during the daytime so that they would have a good excuse for not pointing out the star (they weren't called 'wise men' for nothing). They would also agree not to reveal anything that Herod might use to locate the child, but to pretend to be ignorant and trusting of Herod.

The magi were probably not surprised by the response they received when they reached town. Instead of finding Jerusalem rejoicing they found them to be ignorant of the entire event [Ma.2:2,3]. Although the religious scholars (scribes) knew the correct birthplace, they didn't know when. They also had not noticed the star. They told Herod that they had first seen the star [Ma.2:7]. Whether this date was true or part of the plan to mislead Herod is not known. Herod tells them to go to Bethlehem (5mi. away), find the child and report back to him the child's location so that he too could go to worship the child. The wise men leave Jerusalem at dusk and head for Bethlehem (5mi. south).

The star reappears and they follow it to the house where the family took up residence following the birth [Ma.2:11]. At this point, the star takes on the characteristics of a supernatural event (as indicated by the 'star's' movement and positioning upon their arrival). This eliminates the possibility that the star was a conjunction, nova, supernova, comet or meteor. They present their gifts and probably spend the night at a local caravansary (see description '*Family's Point of View*').

Their plan was probably to return to Herod the next day with some deception as to the child's location. Since they had no reason to believe that the family would leave Bethlehem and they suspected that Herod would attempt to kill the child, then it was probably their plan to tell Herod that the child's family had departed from Bethlehem and was already outside his jurisdiction. The wise men would perceive this as the logical choice to protect the child without alarming the family.

In a dream they are warned to return home without first seeing Herod. This would be necessary to prevent the wise men from inadvertently telling Herod the truth, as it would provide Herod with an advantage in his attempt to kill the Christ child.

THE FAMILY'S POINT OF VIEW

Upon arriving at Bethlehem the family finds that there is no room "in the inn." This would imply that there was only one 'motel' at Bethlehem.

Back then, a motel was known as a ‘caravansary.’ Caravansaries were generally located outside town at the intersection of major roads (like motels along the interstate now). They would cover about an acre of land and were surrounded by a one story high stone wall (to keep out animals and robbers). Built along the inside of the wall would be a two story structure consisting of individual rooms on the top floor (above the top of the wall) accessed by a stair case and an open, common balcony/corridor fronting on the rooms. Underneath the rooms were individual bedding area assignments for the traveler’s animals (the equivalent of today’s parking garage). A well would be in the middle of the courtyard formed by the wall and two-story structure.

Those who could afford the private rooms would be up above the wall where they could benefit from whatever breeze may exist (or in cold weather would hang blankets over the doorway and windows. Poorer guests would pay to camp within the courtyard area for the security that it offered. During inclement weather they would temporarily move into the stables sheltered under the private rooms. It was probably at the Bethlehem caravansary that they were told that there was no private rooms left. Instead they stayed in the stable area under the rooms.

A famous conservative Pharisee by the name of Hillel was also of the lineage of David. It is quite possible that he and his son Simeon had already arrived, or where expected. If they were expected, then a room would have certainly been reserved for them. If they were already there, then they would have been aware of the commotion of the birth and visiting shepherds.

It was here, probably with the help of a midwife, that the Christ child is born and the shepherds visit with their story of the angels’ visitation to all that would listen in the caravansary [Lu.2:16-18]. Although the shepherds didn’t keep the birth a secret it didn’t become common knowledge for the following reasons. The people at the inn were travelers and would be gone in the morning and the shepherds would likely return to the fields that same night. Considering the distaste most people had for shepherds (considered a low class of people), the expectation that the coming king would be born in a more befitting setting and that the announcement would be made to the temple priests (or other persons of higher class stature) it is doubtful that many people (outside Mary and Joseph) put much stock in the story.

After the birth the family takes up residence in Bethlehem. It was probably their intent to remain in Bethlehem until it was time to present the child at the temple (after 40 days). It is then that the magi visit to worship the child and present the gifts of their kings (gold and perfume). The magi then leave (perhaps to spend the night in the same caravansary where Christ was born). That night Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt. Without waiting for morning he gathered his family and left for Egypt—five days away (over 100mi.) [Ma.2:11-14]. There they remained until the death of Herod (which historians date as April 4BC).

After Herod’s death they returned to their home in Nazareth.

THE SHEPHERDS POINT OF VIEW

Shepherding was considered a lowly profession. The shepherds would spend long periods, during good weather, out in the lands surrounding town leading the sheep to new grazing areas. In cold weather the sheep would be in a ‘barn’ at the edge of town or in the countryside in a cave or other sheltered area. On this particular night the shepherds were staying (“abiding”) in the field at night indicating that it was not winter weather [Lu.2:8].

When the angel arrived they were terrified, but were reassured by the angel. The shepherds were given the sign of swaddling clothes and not a star. Although they may earlier have seen the same star that the magi first saw they may not have been familiar with the prophecy of Num.24:17. On *this* evening it must be presumed that the star could not be seen since it would have been a natural sign for shepherds, who were familiar with the night sky.

Then comes the heavenly host of angels singing praise. After the display is over the shepherds rushed to see the baby. How do they know where to go? The first place to check would be the caravansary. They were poor enough to be familiar with staying with the animals when at a caravansary. It was also the logical place to start since it was also outside of town.

HEROD'S POINT OF VIEW

When Herod heard of the reason for the magi's visit to Judea it worried him. Not that he should have anything to worry about from a baby he could kill him anytime, but that he could expect trouble from the people if they believed the report of the magi. When word got out that these wise men apparently put enough stock in the fulfillment of the prophecy to come that distance with expensive gifts it couldn't help but fuel the fire of insurrection.

The magi most likely tricked Herod and the scribes into believing that they were ignorant of Herod's true intentions. They played along by providing enough information to explain their presence, but not enough to reveal any information of use to the king. However, it would be unlike Herod not to have the magi followed. This would provide him with the child's location regardless.

After the magi left the house the spies (if they existed) would have reported the child's position back to Herod. It would be a safe bet that if that scenario was true, then Herod would have planned on having the child killed the next day. This may explain why Joseph was warned to leave immediately, without waiting for morning. After being foiled in his plan to kill the child Herod reverted to plan 'B.' Plan B was likely to have taken shape back when Herod spoke privately to the magi. His question concerning when the magi first saw the star was probably an attempt to date the maximum age of the Christ child. Plan B is to kill all male children who could fall within the possible age bracket by Herod's reckoning. This wouldn't have been the best option since it would have heightened the political unrest, but it was an option nonetheless. That plan was put into effect when the house was discovered vacated, the magi didn't return and Herod realized he had obviously been hoodwinked. Herod couldn't be sure where the child was residing, but had no reason to believe that they had fled the area. With this in mind, he simply had all male children two years and younger put to death that lived in and around Bethlehem [Ma.2:16].

WHEN DID THE BIRTH TAKE PLACE?

Historians date Herod the Great's death in April of 4 BC. This places Christ's birth prior to April, 4 BC. Since Christ was baptized by John the Baptist to meet the requirements of the Levitical priesthood (washed and anointed at age 30, see BAPTISM), then we know that his birth must have been 30 years prior to 27 AD (historical date of Christ's baptism). This would place Christ's birth in 4 BC since there is no year 0 (AD or BC). These combined facts narrow Christ's birth to between January and April, 4 BC.

Other than that, there are a few key verses that can be used to place the events of the Christmas story in their proper chronological order. These verses are Ma.2:1,14,15,19-23 and Lu.2:22,39.

The family was in Egypt when Herod died [Ma.2:19]. This was over 100 miles away (at least 5 days travel time). Upon Herod's death they leave Egypt for the return trip to Israel, but during the trip they hear that Herod's son, Archelaus reigned in his place. They, no doubt, also heard of what was going on in Jerusalem.

According to the renowned historian of the period, Josephus, the actions of Herod in killing all male two year olds sparked violent uprisings by the Jews. Although Archelaus came down hard on the demonstrators, killing up to 3000 in one day, he wasn't successful at bringing an end to the violence. The uprising required Roman troops to be dispatched from Syria by Quintilius Varus. These troops didn't just kill demonstrators, they crucified them (around 2000).

Joseph, instead, took his family (as directed by God) to their original home town, Nazareth [Ma.2:22].

While living in Nazareth the 40 day period of separation for Mary ends [Lu.2:22] and Christ is taken to Jerusalem to present Him to God (a requirement for male children who are the first born in a family) [Lu.2:23,24]. This is where we meet Simeon and Anna [Lu.2:25-38]. Following the presentation in Jerusalem the family moves back to their home town of Nazareth [Lu.2:4 w/ 2:39]. We know that the family leaves for Egypt and then returns *before* the presentation because Lu.2:39 makes it clear that they *returned* to Nazareth, having moved there after their return from Egypt [Ma.2:22,23].

They return to Nazareth following Herod's death in April. This would require about 5 days travel time. That places their return to Nazareth between approximately 5 April and 5 May. We don't know how many days passed before they presented Jesus at the temple (40 days after the birth). If they presented Him immediately upon their return to Nazareth, then the earliest birth date would have been April 5th minus 40 days, or about Jan. 24th. The last date that could be accepted would be April 30 (the last possible date for Herod's death) minus 5 days travel to Egypt (Joseph was in Egypt when the angel told him of Herod's death) minus 40 days, or about March 16th.

This leaves us with a birth date between about Jan.24th and March 16th. It is more likely to be later in this period since flocks of sheep were rarely in the fields in the winter months (with night temperatures as low as 20°F), but wintering under cover on stored feed. This would imply that if the angels appeared to shepherds who were in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night that it was not winter.

Other items of note

Another item of note is how the most famous of all Christmas related verses has changed (for the worse). That verse is Lu.2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

In 1881 two liberal scholars by the name of Westcott and Hort were approached by Oxford University to assist, with other scholars, a revision of the New Testament. The sequence of events were as follows:

1. The two scholars were already friends (they worked at the same university) and immediately direct the efforts of the entire group. This was because the committee for revision was loaded with liberal scholars by the influence of Oxford. Oxford paid the expenses in return for a copyright on the results. Oxford loaded the committee with liberals to favor a dramatic

result. In this way they were assured of making a considerable profit off of the new version while maintaining the air that it was the product of ‘scholarly research’.

2. The only conservative on the committee was Scrivener and he began to be systematically outvoted on every conflict.
3. Neither Westcott nor Hort believed that the Bible was an inspired document whose accuracy was being preserved by God’s promise [1Ki.8:56; Ps.12:6,7; Isa.30:8; 40:8; Ma.24:35; Heb.4:12; 1Pet.1:23; etc.]. In fact, they didn’t believe in the inspiration of any manuscript, including the original. Therefore, they didn’t see a conflict with using Vaticanus and Sinaitic MSS (manuscripts) as their final authority (i.e. the *real* God’s Word). This was done in spite of the fact that these manuscripts represented a text that had been unknown in the world for 1500 years (a violation of God’s Promise).
4. Both of these MSS (and two others for a total of four) add one letter to the text of Lu.2:14. Despite the thousands of surviving documents that don’t add to the text these MSS were used instead. The phrase in question reads as thus (Greek rendered into English characters/literal English translation/KJV);

epi-ges-eirene-en-anthropois-eudokia
on earth peace to mankind good thinking
on earth peace, good will towards men.

The two MSS that Westcott and Hort pushed added a letter to eudokia to make it the plural form (eudokias). This had the effect of changing the meaning of anthropois from ‘men’ in general (mankind) to selected ‘men’ plural. This changed the literal interpretation to

“...on earth peace to men good thinking...”

This is interpreted in English as;

“...on earth peace to men [who] think good [thoughts?]...”

Marshall’s literal translation of the Westcott & Hort text reads;

“...on earth peace among men of goodwill...”

This changes the text from addressing all mankind to a text that is inconsistent with the broad scope of “on earth peace”.

5. Because of the influence that the 1881 text of Westcott and Hort has had over that and the current generation of textual scholars nearly all ‘Bibles(?)’ produced since then have dumped the KJV readings in favor of the text produced by men who don’t believe in inspiration! That includes the Revised Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the American Bible Union Version, the Knox Version, the Modern English Version, the Twentieth Century Version, the New International Version, the New American Standard Version, Today’s English Version, etc.