

# The star that shone o'er Bethlehem will forever be a mystery to science

By ELLIOTT PINE

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem.

Saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

When they had heard the king, they departed, and to the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it stood over the spot where the young child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."  
—Matthew 2:2-10

The Star! Matthew calmly records the appearance of this marvelous heavenly portent as a historical fact. For 1900 years many millions have believed the majestic and unimaginably beautiful herald of the Messiah actually shone over Bethlehem, casting a beam of effulgent glory on that stable "where the young child was."

It has seemed entirely fitting the birthplace of Christ should be pointed out in so magnificent a manner. Few laymen ever thought of questioning the reality of that star, although nothing like it ever was known before or after the momentous event. But astronomers, being exact scientists, have tried to reconcile the evangelist's words with the known facts on the nature and motions of heavenly bodies. The other three Gospels, by the way, do not mention the star.

In the 17th century, Johann Kepler, one of the greatest of the early astronomers, while calculating the orbits of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, extended his figures back to the time of Christ. He discovered these three planets were in conjunction in the year 7 B.C., according to the calendar. Making allowance for the well known error in dating the year of Christ's birth, it

was possible to call the year 7 of our era as actually the year in which Christ was born. Now if, as Kepler calculated, the three planets were very close together in that year, they would form a brilliant glow in the sky, during the month of December. So, Kepler reasoned, the conjunction of these planets was the Star of Bethlehem.

## In sign of Pisces

This conjunction appears in the sign of Pisces, or the Fishes, every 800 years. Since the sign of Pisces had a special meaning to the Jews, it was entirely logical for the Magi to interpret an apparently new star within this sign as the long awaited messenger from heaven, and to start on the long journey. Kepler's theory satisfied pretty well until 1826, when Professor Ideler of Berlin pointed out that at no time are the three planets in absolute conjunction so they would appear as a single star, even to the naked eye.

Another piece of evidence tending to cast doubt on the Kepler theory was brought in by the geographers. They showed there were no roads or trails through the mountainous regions the wise men had to traverse on which they could keep the planets in sight for any length of time. So this attractive explanation gradually faded out. It will not be until early in the 25th century, however, that scientists can test the full possibilities of Kepler's conjecture. It is not entirely ruled out until this time comes.

## Perhaps a comet

In the last century came a new attempt to explain the Star. Prof. R.A. Proctor propounded the theory that the mystic sign was really a comet. These celestial travelers of space, flaring up suddenly, moving across the sky often for days or weeks, and then disappearing, always impressed the ancients as mighty portents.

There are a few flaws in this theory, too, as several historians quickly declared. First, a comet was a fearful thing to all peoples of antiquity, a harbinger of evil to come, a warning of retribution for sin. The Magi, being learned in astrology, would know this, of course, and would not likely consid-

er a comet an announcement of the Saviour's arrival. It is possible these wise men did not follow the prevailing superstition. They might have called some comet His star. It is objected, however, that any comet bright enough to attract the wise men's attention would be noted down in some secular history—Josephus, in particular. There is no such confirmatory account.

## The nova theory

Lately, a plausible and poetic theory has been presented. The Star of Bethlehem may have been a "nova" or suddenly blazing star. For a brief time a nova may outshine every star in the sky. The most brilliant on record flared up in 1572. Another was observed by the aforementioned Kepler, and by Galileo, in 1604. Novae that can be seen by the human eye are rare. It is only since photography has been applied to astronomy that much is known about them. What causes the flaming phenomenon is not known, but possibly it is occasioned by the collision of two "dead" stars. The impact liberates the fiery interiors of the two bodies, and the seething gases swirl and shoot in a glorious display of light. The nova may burn for some time, but eventually it cools and fades, and generally disappears from sight. Seldom do they last more than a few days.

So if a nova of extraordinary brilliance did burst forth a few days or weeks before the birth of Christ, this could be the Star toward which the wise men hurried, so long ago. It must be remembered, however, that the nova, if such it was, actually had burned out long before the first Christmas eve, because most of the stars are so distant light takes many years to travel through space from them to the earth. Only lately the Nova Hercules has been seen, but its light has been traveling through space for 1300 years, at 186,000 miles a second.

## Learned guesses

But these conjectures and scientific guesses are simply that—guesses. No one knows just what the Christmas Star was, or how it directed the wise men from the east to the little town of Bethlehem. It may be that, since there were prophecies to

guide the Magi to that village in Judea, the Star did not exactly point the way, as come fanciful legends have put it, but merely indicated to the wise men the glorious day was near at hand.

The director of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago comments that no star could "stand still" in the heavens while the three Magi plodded wearily onward. It would swing with the other stars in the daily round, as the earth turns on its axis, and again, a star could not remain fixed over the stable on that night of nights, casting down a great broad beam of purest light. That is, no "natural" star could. It would move onward with the procession of the heavens, until it set below the horizon.

## A miracle

But the world has believed in that Star for 19 centuries. Scientists do not deny it could have been a miracle—that "Star of Wonder, Star of Hope" that shone over the crib of the Saviour. It is no more difficult to believe a star could send its beams down on that sacred spot than that angels sang to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest." It is one more marvel among many marvels.

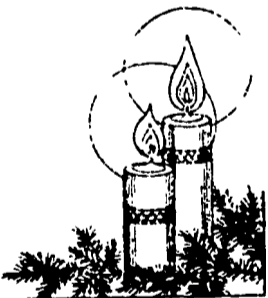
From the scriptures and from tradition it is known the three wise men or Magi ("Magi" was the term for astrologer in the East) saw a

great light in the sky, and took it for the Star that heralded the birth of the King of the Jews, who would deliver mankind from bondage. The three learned men, called kings by tradition, mounted their camels, and came together, one from Chaldea, one from Persia, and one from Arabia. Their names, according to Bede, were Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

When they came to the stable in Bethlehem, they knelt in reverent wonder, like the simple shepherds gathered about the Babe, and offered their rich gifts of "gold, frankincense and myrrh." Today, although scientific knowledge has advanced a thousand-fold since the time of Christ, the mystery attached to all that sacred story remains.

The Star of Bethlehem is still a mystery to science. It will always remain so, for there is no way to recreate the physical conditions of that night, so long ago, and to investigate the phenomena with precise instruments. But millions of Christians will continue to believe the glorious symbol of hope, the Star, shone over the little stable on that first Christmas, while celestial music floated over the countryside, and all the world was hushed in wonder.

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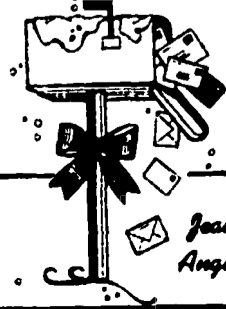
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