

# The Bethlehem Star

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 25 December 2014

Preacher: Philip Wells

[ 0 : 00 ] So we need to know the difference between a star and a planet. I have to say this is fairly recent knowledge.! No, that's not quite true. How it works is fairly recent.

Knowing how it works is fairly recent. The ancients knew that there was a difference between stars and planets because you can see them being different. Does any of the boys and girls know what's the difference between a star and a planet?

Yes, sir. But because stars are pretty, kind of as a mother to be careful. Stars are what?

Stars are what you do, kind of as a mother. When you look at them. Right, okay. That's an interesting thought. That's an interesting thought.

It wasn't the answer I was going to give myself. I'll tell you what I think is the answer. In terms of how they're made, stars are burning things and give out light.

[ 1 : 08 ] And planets are rocks and they reflect light. So that's one difference. And stars are ever such a long way. And planets are quite close.

And the planets go round and round and the stars stay still. So I thought we could illustrate that. So we're going to have a star and a planet. It's not quite sure which is which. I need two volunteers. One. Two. Right. Those are the quickest. Come here. Come here. Now then. Ladies first. Would you like to be a star or a planet? A star.

You'd like to be a star. Okay. Right. You hold on a minute. Right. You're going to be a star. Right. A star. You come over here. Stand over here. Hold that up.

Because you're the star. Now stars are fixed. So you just stay there. And we'll admire your twinkling beauty. Okay. So you're the star. Now you're going to be a planet.

[ 2 : 08 ] There are instructions for being a planet. Okay. And you have to follow the instructions carefully. Planets go round. I thought of doing this last night. It seems such a good idea.

But we'll see. Now. So you're going to be the planet. Hang on to that. That's the planet. You're going to carry that. And I would like you to go right round there. Past your mum.

Round the back. Round like that. Don't trip over these things here. And come back here. Right. So slowly, slowly, slowly. Right. Hold it up so we can all see.

There's the planet. Moving. So as we see the planets move across the sky. But the star is. Well it's still actually. It's still. So well done planet.

Good. Right. Good. Right. Come back up here. So well done for that. So you think of the Bethlehem star. It moved. So.

[ 3 : 07 ] You are moving. So that's one thought there. Except. It's more complicated than that. Because we now know. That the earth that we're on.

Is moving. Right. So what we've got to do. Do it again. No. Don't complicate it that way. Right. So you're going to do your bit. Do it nice and slowly.

I shall be. I'll be the earth. And I'll go around here. And I want you to consider. What. This planet.

The planet Harry. Is that right? Got the right name. Looks like. From the planet earth. Okay. So you start off on your bit. Go. Right. So there he is.

Whoa. There he is. There. He's over there now. There. Oh he's behind me now. Oh he's that side of me.

[ 4 : 08 ] Oh and now he's at that. Right. Good. Okay. Well done. Round of applause again. And this is the tricky bit. That. Because the planets are moving like that.

As we on earth. Watch other planets. They move. First they're behind us. Then they're in front of us. Then they're behind us. Again they're in front of us. And this really puzzled the ancient astronomers. It is. It is called retrograde motion. You're so glad you came this morning. Aren't you? And this. This puzzled the astronomers. Because the planets would move across the sky.

Then they go back. And they go forward again. Then perhaps they go back. And go forward. And stand still. So that was the puzzle. About the planets.

And the ancient Greek philosophers said. That such motion. Quote. Is inconsistent. With the orderly behavior. Of a gentleman. Unquote. So I think that was.

[ 5 : 07 ] Alfonso the wise of Castile. said that. Truly. I think. So. We've got stars. Which stay still. Well done. We've got planets. Which move. Well done.

Thank you very much boys and girls. You can keep the apple and the orange if you want. I washed it. So you can eat it. Thank you. Well, we're going to think for a few minutes then about the Star of Bethlehem.

That's what we read. Let's pray as we come to think together.

Help us, Lord, to hear your voice and to think your thoughts as we consider together. Thank you for the great events that we have before us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I thought we'd look at the Star of Bethlehem. I thought we'd do something a little bit different, but then you might say, haven't you forgotten you did exactly the same thing last year?

[ 6 : 28 ] I can't remember what I did last year, actually, but I don't think it was the Star. My aim is to have four observations and then four sort of applications from this.

And I'll try to keep it moving along. So what do we think about this star? So let's look at the meaning of the Star of Bethlehem.

We call it the Star of Bethlehem, although obviously it moved, so it wasn't just in one place, was it? So four sort of observations. Number one, it was a cosmic event.

So it was a big event. It was a big event, although I have to say, it was also rather hidden in that most of us would not notice if there was a new star, would we?

It would be there, but most of us would say, I don't even know which stars are which now, let alone which is a new one. So it's interesting, it's cosmic, but it's also rather hidden.

[ 7 : 29 ] It's, but it's cosmic in the sense it's not like a tarot card thing, you know? Somebody turns a tarot card and says, oh, strange and significant.

That's very private and very small scale, isn't it? Or in Maria's family, it used to be the tradition that you'd read tea leaves. So when you'd finish your cup of tea, you'd turn the tea over and find significance.

And the tea leaves, well, that's pretty small scale stuff, isn't it? But a star is cosmic. So we could draw this at least. It's a big thing.

It's not just a private thing, although it is somewhat hidden. Let's see what my next thought. We should be impressed. I think we should be impressed.

It's the product of a God who is able to do stuff with stars. The Bible says he knows all their names. He brings them out so not one of them is missing.

[ 8 : 30 ] He's a big God and he can do stuff with stars. And we should be impressed. Although, we might not be because we might not have noticed because we might not have known how many stars there were in the first place.

Interesting sort of complexity to that. Second observation, it is very unaccountable and very strange. So even though we know what stars are, it doesn't fit the normal pattern for a star.

And even though we know what planets are, I don't think it fits the normal pattern for a planet either. I could be wrong because planets do move and then stand still and then move again.

But I'm not sure that this quite fits that. Just look at the text. If you're there in Matthew chapter 2, the timing seems to be important because Herod accurately inquires the timing in verse 7 and in verse 16, it refers to the timing he had accurately learned from the Magi.

So it's a very carefully timed star. It's a guiding star, but it seems to guide them as far as Jerusalem and then they don't seem to have any more guidance from it.

[ 9 : 56 ] So they go and ask in Jerusalem, where is this king born? And then they get their guidance from Scripture. You go to Bethlehem and then the star seems to start working again and go ahead of them, verse 9, it goes ahead of them until it's stopped over the place where the child was.

And I find that quite strange. I mean, how accurately was the star? I mean, above. Does it mean above the town or does it mean above the house or does it mean above the particular corner of the bedroom where the child was?

I'm not sure. It would be difficult to measure, really, wouldn't it, if you saw a star above? How would you? But anyway, it says that it was above. So I think there's something very strange and

unaccountable about this star.

It alerts them to the fact of the king of the Jews. They go to the capital city and thus to the center of Jewish opinion and to the place where they can get access to the scriptures and then they're guided to Bethlehem and I think it fits no known natural occurrence, although there have been very many well-meaning attempts to harmonize with natural phenomena and it's a very strange supernatural occurrence.

I can't think of any other example in the Bible of anything quite like this at all. So it's unaccountable and strange. It gives exact timing, it guides, stops guiding and then guides again very accurately.

[ 11 : 36 ] It fits no known phenomenon and it doesn't fit with any previous supernatural phenomena. Thirdly, it fits somewhat loosely and obliquely with biblical teaching and worldview and background.

So how does it fit? I mean, it does fit but it fits in a rather loose way. What do we know from the Bible about stars?

Well, they're created by God. The Bible often says they're created by God and it comments on the large number of stars. So Abraham is told to look up at the stars, see how many they are and that's how many his offspring will be.

Like the grains of sand on the sea, like the grains of sand at the seaside, there's a lot of them. Likewise, there's a whole lot of stars.

So presumably God likes stars because he's made so many of them. He has a special affection for stars. The stars are controlled by God and they don't control us.

[ 12 : 48 ] So there's a lot in the Bible to say you don't pay homage to stars because they don't control us. That would be a terrible thing to worship stars and the sun and the moon.

They are controlled by God. So that's another fairly strong strand in the Bible. But they do have links with other things.

So what's my reference? Do anybody think of a reference where angels are linked with stars? I saw Lucifer fall.

Yes, like a falling star. I've got Job 38, 7. The morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy. There's a link between morning stars and the sons of God.

That's the angels. There's not many of these references. People. Link between stars and people. A dream that Joseph had.

[ 13 : 58 ] Do you know that one? Yeah, the sun and the moon and the 11 stars bowed down to him. Do you remember that? So there's a link between stars and people, which I didn't put up on there.

Battles. There's one reference which links stars with battles. It's, yes, I think it is in Joshua.

The stars in their courses fought against Sisera. Yeah, so there's one thing about stars and battles. Jesus and stars.

And there's some links between Jesus and stars. It's very rare. You'd have to know your Bible quite well to pick up on these. He holds the seven stars in his hands. So that's the churches.

Yes, thank you for that. Yeah. The bright and morning star. Yes. That's a revelation thing. And the day star in your heart shall appear. I think it's in Peter.

[ 15 : 01 ] So there's a few references to Jesus being like a star. Like the morning star. Morning star is, Tim will correct me on this, planet Venus, isn't it?

The morning star. So you see, it's because of this motion of the planets, and sometimes Venus is just arising just before dawn.

Sometimes Venus is setting after nighters fall, and in the case, Venus is also the evening star. But occasionally, the Bible picks up on the morning star, and disasters, the links between disasters and stars.

Revelation, yes. The idea that when disaster strikes, either you can't see the stars, they become darkened in the sky, or they fall from heaven.

Which I presume is a sort of amplification of the same thought. So there's not a lot to fit this in with. Do you see what I mean? The Matthew thing doesn't fit in with lots of other things.

[ 16 : 06 ] And the one, the nearest fit, is Numbers 24-17. I put 24-7 there, but I meant 24-17. And if you have a Bible and you know where to look, you might like to check this up.

This is quite an obscure prophecy in a corner of the Bible. It's a prophecy by Balaam, who was a mischievous and disreputable prophet, who was hired to prophesy bad things, but God overruled, and he ended up saying things he didn't really intend to say.

And in Numbers 24-17, it says, I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob.

A scepter will rise out of Israel. Did I write this down? Yeah, this is the Greek translation, which is slightly different. I point to him, but not now.

I bless him, he draws not near. A star shall rise out of Jacob. A man shall spring out of Israel.

Slightly different translation. That's the Greek translation.

[17:21] That's the nearest thing we get to a prophecy of a king and a star. Yeah? Does that make sense?

Numbers 24-17, A star shall rise out of Jacob, and then the parallel, a man shall spring out of Israel. It's a king, as it's referring to.

So, I say, in terms of the Bible, it fits fairly obliquely with the Bible world. It was not a lot about stars and kings.

Just, it's fairly rare, and just that one particular prophecy. So, it's still all fairly mysterious, but I'll tell you this last one, if I can press the right button.

The thing that it does fit with is the Magi. They're totally at home with this. Have you noticed this?

We're thinking, how does this fit with us? We're not supposed to have too much to do with stars.

[18:20] We're not supposed to do horoscopes. It's all a bit dodgy. But the one people who are totally comfortable with this are the Magi. So, they were looking.

Good for them. They were looking. They had it quite clear. A star like that means a king. They had no problem with that.

And a star like that means the king of the Jews. And we know about the Jews. We know where they lived. We know where their capital city is. So, we're going to go to their capital city. And the Magi, these are the people that are totally at home with this.

They've seen it. They understand what it means. And they're the ones who are on the ball with it.

And who are the Magi? Well, they're foreigners.

They're outsiders. They're clearly not paid up Jews. They've come a long way away. They are seekers. They are, aren't they? When this happens, they don't say, oh, we're having nothing to do with that.

[19:19] They say, this is really something we want to follow up on. We've seen his star. He's the king of the Jews. We're going to seek him. We're going to fight him. And they are open.

Quite rare to find people who are open to the king of the Jews. But these people are open, aren't they? Tell us more. They go to King Herod and they say, you know, we're up for this.

We want to worship him. Just show us where he is. And then when the scriptures are explained to them, they say, whoa, great. Off we go. Bethlehem then.

And they're open to these things. They're perhaps a little too open because Herod had said to them, report back to me so that I may worship him.

And they're up for that as well. Yeah, sure. Yeah, we'll come back to you. No problem. And God has to sort of close down their openness at that point, say it's not a good idea.

[20:15] And they're blessed, aren't they? They have this privilege of seeing the Christ. They're used by God in a way we'll see at the moment.

They're certainly used to give a testimony to the Jerusalem establishment, the Jerusalem aristocracy. And they're protected because rather than going back to Herod, you know, they might have had their throats cut, I suppose, I don't know, but a bit dodgy to go back to Herod.

God sends them a dream and says, don't go back that, go another way. So this is the people that it fits with. And it's strange, isn't it? Because we're reading the Bible and saying, we're a bit uncomfortable with this, but they're totally at home with it.

And I think of foreigners who sort of come into the Bible totally at home and then we'd never see anything on with them again. I mean, Melchizedek, Bible scholars know about Melchizedek.

He's a king in the Old Testament. He sort of zaps onto the scene, does some stuff, disappears, and he only comes up later in the Bible when people say, actually, that's like Jesus.

[21:22] And I think about the Queen of Sheba. Because she comes from a long way away, seeking, open, wanting to appreciate and worship, and then she disappears again.

Jesus mentions her. He says she did really well. The Queen of the South will rise up in judgment against this generation because she, what does it say, she worshipped and these other people who ought to know are so sceptical.

So I think these wise men are a little bit like that. Now why on earth did it do that? I'll press the right button.

It's just that I put the wrong slide on, I think. Right, so that was my fourth observation and then some sort of conclusions.

Number one, I think this story, which is a mysterious story, isn't it? It's there. It shows that God is interested in giving his people, the Jews, lots of chances to honour their Messiah.

[ 22 : 26 ] because one of the effects of the visit of the Magi is to flag up to Herod and all the Bible scholars and the, you know, Bible Institute and the theological colleges of Jerusalem.

A star has been seen. Somebody's saying, our king has been born. Now get out, get down there and find out about it. And it's so, one of the things that these people do is to give God's own people a nudge and a push and a warning and a flag up to them about their own Messiah.

And God does give people lots of chances. And in this case, he's giving chances, if you like, to the people who ought to know already. They had the scriptures.

They've been taught it in Sunday school. But here's from left field. Is that what they say? Am I saying that right? A strange left, that way. A strange, oh, a reminder.

So I think this is one thing. God gives people lots of chances, including the near people. And then, secondly, God is interested in the far people, the outsiders.

[ 23 : 47 ] And here he's giving people who are not Jews an invitation to worship the Messiah. You have to remember that in the way the Bible works, God is working with the Jews all the way through history up to this point.

And from this point onwards, or from the resurrection onwards, it's going to go ballistic and international. But here's a little foretaste of that. Here's some foreign kings who are open and willing and seeking and they come and worship Jesus.

And God is interested in giving the outsiders the invitation to worship the Messiah. and ethnically speaking, that's most of us are outsiders.

Most of us are outsiders. We're not paid up Jews, most of us. So, it's God's grace, isn't it? And in the Bible, it says, this is God's ultimate plan to bring in all the nations.

The kings of the earth shall bring their splendor into the heavenly Jerusalem. One day, all the nations will have something to offer by way of worship in the heavenly city.

[ 25 : 02 ] And this is a little foretaste of it, isn't it? These, however many they were, just a handful of foreign dignitaries worshipping the Savior. And this point, I think, is actually powerfully made in the text.

God is prepared to use all sorts of methods on people's own wavelength. wavelength. Because we are struggling with this star business, aren't we? But it was a Magi thing.

They were into that sort of stuff. And for them, for those astrologers, astronomers, he used something on their wavelength. He used a star. And, sorry, let's go back on that one.

There are stories these days of God speaking to Muslims, and perhaps he uses dreams. Muslims. And I don't know how God has spoken to you. Perhaps you're a feeling person, and you came to be convinced of Christianity by powerful feelings.

Or perhaps you're a thinking person, and you came to be convinced of Christianity because you thought it through, and Christianity seemed to be the most coherent intellectual worldview.

[ 26 : 15 ] God deals with people on their own wavelength, and maybe he's dealing with you today. Maybe he's got something on your wavelength which he's using to bring you to Jesus Christ.

So no one can say, oh, well, God doesn't understand me. God's with those people. God's with those English people. It's not with my ethnic group.

You say, well, no, actually God's interested in all ethnic groups. Or, God's only interested in university types, and I'm not a university type, but actually God's interested in all sorts of types. We might say, God's interested in people who get carried away, but I don't get carried away.

I need to think about things. Well, God's interested in you too. No one can say I'm the wrong type because God has a wavelength. Whatever your wavelength is, God can speak to you on that wavelength.

And my final observation is this, that it's the story is not really about the star at all, is it? The hero of this story is not the star.

[ 27 : 23 ] The hero is Jesus. Because what's the star about? It is about bringing people to Jesus. And although we start off way out, left field, that's the left, isn't it?

what we bring, we're brought to the real standard center, which is the Christ of Scripture. So the Christ that he brings people to is not a Christ simply of dreams, or a Christ of strangeness, or a Christ of one-offs, or a Christ of private inventions, but the Christ, the real Christ, the Christ of Scripture.

And he brings people to worship him. And that is where I'd like to leave us, worshipping Jesus Christ.

That's where the story, it starts off way out, but it ends up with the worship of Jesus. And Christians are called to live as worshippers of Jesus.

[ 28 : 31 ] Today's a good day to worship Jesus. Every day's a good day to worship Jesus. 2014 was a good year to worship Jesus. 2015 will be another good year to worship Jesus, to live for him every day.

And dear listener, I hope that that would include you. Let's sing together. And we're going to sing number 387.

Let's sing 1887.