

# “Starry-Eyed” (Melchior)

Matthew 2:1-12 <sup>1</sup>

Good evening! My name is Melchior, and I’ve come to tell you a story that has a great deal to do with what you’re here to celebrate this evening. I suspect that it’s a story that most of you have never heard before, although some of you will recognize my name.<sup>2</sup>

I am one of the three men you know as “The Three Wise Men,” “The Three Magi,” or “The Three Kings.” Wise we were, but we were not kings. I think the “kings” part came from mistakenly connecting us with the words of Psalm 72:8-11, where it is written,

*May he rule from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth. . . .  
May the kings of Tarshish and the coasts and islands bring tribute, the kings of Sheba  
and Seba offer gifts. Let all kings bow in homage to him, all nations serve him.*

While those words were originally written about King Solomon, they also apply to the Jewish Messiah . . . but they do not apply to the three of us. But I anticipate the story.

You may know that “Magi” is the plural form of the word “magus,” which originally meant “magician.” I was not a magician in the sense in which you use that word today. I was a scientist, a philosopher, and an astronomer, and I lived in Rey, which was the capital of the Persian Empire in my day. Rey was one of the major cities on the famous “Silk Road,” which will be important by and by.

The second member of our famous trio was Caspar, also a Magus, whose home was the city of Piravom in southern India; and the third of our “magical” trio was Balthasar, from Mocha in Arabia. I was the oldest of the three, but because of the great distances between the cities where we lived, we did not know one another as this story begins.

Caspar, Balthasar, and I studied the heavens on every clear night, and, because there was no electricity in those days, and thus no light after dark besides candles and firelight, when the sky was cloudless, we routinely saw the heavens with a clarity and brilliance that would astound you today. We studied both stars and planets, which we called “wandering stars,” and we kept careful records of what we observed.

Your astronomers today must go to high mountains in remote places to obtain a view of the sky anything like what we had every night; but they also have advantages we did not have. Your astronomers have instruments of which we could not even dream; and another of their advantages is that they know the three laws of planetary motion Johannes Kepler discovered in the seventeenth century.

Kepler’s laws make it possible to locate each of the planets in our solar system with great precision at any moment in history and from any location on the earth. It is in large measure these three laws that make it possible for scientists down the road at the Applied Physics Laboratory to launch an interplanetary spacecraft and have it rendezvous with the intended planet or comet years later.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 24, 2017. CHRISTmas Eve.

<sup>2</sup> Only Matthew recorded the visit of the “Wise Men,” and he did not give their names. The traditional names come from a Greek manuscript from about A.D. 500.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchior\\_\(Magus\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchior_(Magus))

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Caspar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Caspar)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthazar\\_\(Magus\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthazar_(Magus))

The second advantage your astronomers enjoy today is the availability of computers that use Kepler's equations to quickly calculate the motions of the heavens. Using readily-available and relatively inexpensive software,<sup>3</sup> it is now possible for even a desktop computer to animate the universe at any speed you choose and to view the sky exactly as it looked to us two thousand years ago.<sup>4</sup> I'm going to use some of that software tonight to show you what we saw, and I'm going to tell you why it mattered.<sup>5</sup> It mattered then, and it still matters tonight.

Caspar, Balthasar, and I had just met each other in a breakout group at the 789<sup>th</sup> Global Astronomy Convention, being hosted by the University of Rey in September of what you call 3 B.C. Caspar and Balthasar had traveled the great Silk Road in order to come; and, because travel was so inconvenient, so dangerous, so expensive, and so time-consuming, the convention was a long one, and the three of us got to know one another fairly well through long observatory hours together every night. And, night after night, we began to notice something quite unusual.

I imagine that you know that Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system, and because of this, Jupiter has been known as "the king planet" in many cultures and long before my time. In September of the year 3 B.C., Jupiter appeared to come very close to the star, Regulus, in what is known as a "conjunction." The two are actually many light years apart, but from our vantage point on earth it's possible for them to appear to be close to each other.

"Regulus" comes from the same root as your word, "regal," and, just as Jupiter was—and is—known as the "king planet," Regulus was—and is—known as the "king star." While such conjunctions are not particularly noteworthy, this conjunction occurred as Jupiter was going into what we astronomers call "retrograde motion."

You've seen retrograde motion many times, but you might not have known what to call it. If you pass a car on the highway, the car you're passing appears to be going backward, although

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<sup>3</sup> <http://astronomy.starrynight.com/>

<sup>4</sup> A third advantage today is that we know when to look in the sky for the Sign of Christ. We know from the New Testament that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was King in Jerusalem, and so the date of Herod's death gives us a starting point for when to look in the sky.

The chief resource for dating Herod's death is the Jewish historian, Josephus. Most efforts to find the "star" have been hampered from the conclusion that Herod died in 4 B.C.; but recent studies have shown that this conclusion is the result of a copyist's error in A.D. 1544. All the manuscripts of Josephus prior to 1544 indicate that Herod died in 1 B.C. Since we know from the New Testament that Herod died not long after Jesus' birth, our examination of the heavens turns to the years 3 and 2 B.C., which had never been done until very recently. Searchers had been looking in the years 4 and 5.

<sup>5</sup> Now that we know when to look, we turn to the matter of what to look for. The New Testament gives (at least) ten specific criteria that must be satisfied in order to say that we have found the "star":

1. The star had to signify kingship (Matthew 2:2).
2. The star had to have something to do with the Jews (Matthew 2:2).
3. The star had to signify birth (Matthew 2:2).
4. The star had to appear at an exact time (Matthew 2:7).
5. The star had to be visible during the reign of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1).
6. The star had to be subtle—neither Herod nor his advisors knew of it (Matthew 2:7).
7. The star had to be visible over an extended period of time (Matthew 2:9).
8. The star had to "rise in the east" as heavenly bodies generally appear to do (Matthew 2:2).
9. The star had to be visible over Bethlehem as the Magi left Jerusalem (Matthew 2:9).
10. The star had to "stop" over Bethlehem as the Magi approached (Matthew 2:9).

A meteor doesn't fit these criteria at all. A comet could have satisfied several of them, but the Chinese kept very careful astronomical records, and no comets were recorded in the years 2-3 B.C. A supernova could have satisfied several criteria, but none were observed during these years.

**Much of this information comes from Rick Larson, [www.bethlehemstar.net](http://www.bethlehemstar.net).**

it isn't. In the same way, the planets beyond Earth appear to move backward against the stars when Earth passes them on our way around the sun. This means that "the king planet" was in conjunction with "the king star" not once, not twice, but three times that month, and that got our attention.

More than this, this triple conjunction took place in the constellation, Leo, the Lion. The Lion was the symbol of Israel's tribe of Judah, from whom the Jewish Messiah would come. As it is written in their Scripture, "*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations is his*" (Genesis 49:10). For reasons that are more complicated than I can recount here,<sup>6</sup> Caspar, Balthasar, and I were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, and we concluded that this was the sign of a new and important Jewish king.

Nine months passed as we continued to watch this starry dance with great interest. Jupiter, the king planet, continued to travel across the heavens until it came into spectacular conjunction with Venus, known as "the mother planet," on June 17, 2 B.C. This conjunction was so close and so bright that it was the brightest thing we had ever seen in the heavens except for the sun and the moon. It was, in fact, the brightest conjunction that anyone alive had ever seen, and that event is still used as an illustration in planetaria around the world today. This conjunction, too, took place in the constellation Leo, the Lion (of Judah).

When we added things up, the three of us concluded that the triple conjunction nine months ago must have been the sign of the conception of this new king, and that this conjunction with "the mother planet" must be the sign of his birth. I think it was Balthasar who first had the idea. You had a big solar eclipse this year in your country, and many people traveled great distances to see it. It was in a similar spirit of adventure that Balthasar said one night, "We should go to Judea to find this king."

As the oldest of the three, I was not particularly inclined to make such a journey, but Caspar signed on at once. And so, after I had secured a leave of absence from the university—research, you know—we made preparations to leave.

The distance from Rey to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, was over a thousand miles in a straight line, but a straight line led across a forbidding desert, so our journey up and around "the Fertile Crescent" was much longer than that.

It was December before we reached Judah, and we headed for Jerusalem, assuming that the new king announced in the heavens would be the son of the present king, Herod the Great. But when we arrived at Herod's palace we were quite surprised that there was no new prince to be found.

And because the sequence of signs we had observed and followed would not have been apparent to non-astronomers, Herod and his counselors were not aware of them. They asked us for the exact time that the sign—they called it a "star," but as you now know, that was too simple a description—had appeared. Herod said he wanted to worship the young prince himself . . . but we knew too much about the paranoia of monarchs to be taken in by such a line. It was Herod's intent to kill the usurper, and we knew it . . . but we didn't let on.

Herod's counselors told him that the prophecies foretold that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, just a few miles from Jerusalem (Micah 5:2), so we headed south to the Bethlehem road after our evening meal with Herod and his court. As we left Jerusalem, Caspar, Balthasar,

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<sup>6</sup> The Babylonian Exile is probably the source and vehicle for this knowledge.

and I were reassured to see Jupiter ahead of us in the sky over Bethlehem, and it was striking to see the king planet in the constellation of Virgo, the Virgin, as it was that night.

On that particular night—it was December 25, 2 B.C.—Jupiter was once again beginning a retrograde motion, so as Jupiter changed direction, it appeared to stop over little Bethlehem. We knew we were on the right track.

And it really wasn't that hard to find our young prince. He was, as you now know, just over six months old, and there had been quite a commotion at His birth. Everyone in Bethlehem knew about it, and they knew where the prince and His family were staying now. The townspeople were only too glad to direct such important looking strangers as we were to the little house we were seeking, and they told us something else that I think you'll find interesting.

You may know that the Law of Moses—that great prophet of the Jews—is very particular about the animals to be offered as sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, especially those animals that will be sacrificed as sin offerings. Those sacrificial animals must be without blemish or defect of any kind, and the sacred flocks from which they come are nourished and nurtured from birth until they're taken to the Temple to ensure that they have no wounds or scars or blemishes of any sort.

We learned from our excited hosts that these special sacrificial flocks have been raised and kept in Bethlehem for hundreds of years. The Temple shepherds keep their flocks outside of town and watch over them from a tower that was built long ago by their ancestor Jacob.<sup>7</sup> For nearly 2,000 years before our arrival, that tower had been known as “Migdal Eder” (“migdahl ayder”), or “The Watchtower of the Flock,” and the Temple flocks have been kept near that tower since King Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem nearly a thousand years before we came.

Now while the Temple flocks live outdoors all year long, there is one occasion when a ewe is brought indoors, and that's when she's ready to give birth. The Temple shepherds maintain a special, ceremonially clean stable in The Tower of the Flock, where they bring those ewes for birthing. Everyone in Bethlehem knew about that Tower and its birthing stall, and the prophet Micah had written about that Tower centuries before: “As for you, **watchtower of the flock**, stronghold of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem” (Micah 4:8).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 35:21

<sup>8</sup> Migdal Eder is mentioned in in the Bible in Genesis 35:21 and Micah 4:8. Targum Yerushalmi (also known as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan) states that “**He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.**” *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel On the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* by J. W. Etheridge, M.A. (1862): “And Rahel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jakob erected a pillar over the house of burying-which is the pillar of the tomb of Rahel unto this day. **And Jakob proceeded and spread his tent beyond the tower of Eder, the place from whence, it is to be, the King Meshiha will be revealed at the end of the days.**”

<http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/>

<http://targum.info/pj/pjgen32-36.htm>;

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum\\_Pseudo-Jonathan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum_Pseudo-Jonathan)

See also Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah* in one volume (1886; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), part 1, pp. 185-186, especially this: “**That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, ‘the tower of the flock’**” (p. 186); and also see Rabbi Mike L. Short, *Migdal Edar*, [www.mayimhayim.org/Rabbi%20Mike/Migdal%20Eder.htm](http://www.mayimhayim.org/Rabbi%20Mike/Migdal%20Eder.htm);

<http://www.kolsimcha.org/messages/2009/040909M.pdf>;

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal\\_Eder\\_\(biblical\\_location\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_(biblical_location)).

We learned all this before we came to the house, and there we found the young child and his parents, just as the townspeople had told us. The parents' names were Mary and Joseph, and the baby's name was Yeshua, "Jesus," which means "Salvation is from the Lord"—I'll bet you know that part already.

Caspar, Balthasar and I had brought special gifts with us for this royal child. We had chosen them in Rey before we set out. I brought a gift of **gold**, which is an appropriate gift for a *king*. Caspar brought **frankincense**, which is an appropriate gift for a *high priest*. And Balthasar brought **myrrh**, an expensive spice used for embalming. Myrrh is an appropriate gift for a *prophet*, because far more often than not, prophets become martyrs in the end.

It was well into the night by this time, and after we three said farewell to the young prince and his family, we spent the night in a field beside the road outside of town, as we had done so many nights before on this strange journey. As I've mentioned, we'd already had serious misgivings about returning to Herod, and all three of us had dreams that night that troubled us further, so we left Judea and headed home by another route. We didn't go back to Herod at all. We just vanished into the night.

I expect that most of you know the rest of Jesus' story—about His amazing preaching, teaching, and healing; about how He really *was* God's Prophet, Priest, and King, the Messiah promised of old; about His cruel execution on a Roman cross; and about His resurrection from the grave for the salvation of the world—so I'm not going to go into all that tonight.

Once we got back to Rey, Caspar and Balthasar returned to their own homes, but we kept in touch. We heard about Jesus and those who followed Him from time to time, and we got together one last time in Armenia at the 845<sup>th</sup> Global Astronomy Convention in December of A.D. 54 to remember our Great Adventure. That was our last time together, because Balthasar and I both died in less than a month's time afterward. I was 116, and he was 112. Caspar died as a martyr for Jesus some years after that.

So now you know "the rest of the Story." December 25<sup>th</sup> is not really the date of Jesus' birth—that was June 17<sup>th</sup>. December 25<sup>th</sup> was the date we visited Him and His family in Bethlehem.

Long ago, when Moses saw the burning bush that was not consumed, he drew near to see what was going on, and it was then that he met the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:1-4:31). What we have seen tonight is that, like that burning bush, <sup>1</sup>*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.* <sup>2</sup>*Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge* (Psalm 19:1-2).

Will you draw near, that you, too, might meet God? God is here. God is here now. God has come . . . to you.