

The Birth of Christ & Christmas Star- A Possible Explanation

By Rich Jacobs, M.D.

God's Word tells us about the "Star of Bethlehem". This star has baffled believers and cynics alike for generations. To know what the Christmas star could have been, we must first look at what God's Word has to say about it. Then, we must look to the historical and astronomical clues to gather the facts we need to come to a conclusion. And, we must forget all the wrong things we have been told about the Star and that wonderful night, if we are to come to the truth. Let's begin with God's Word.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of **King Herod**, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Luke 2:1-20

1 In those days **Caesar Augustus** issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while **Quirinius** was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

First Things First -- Fixing False Ideas About the Christ's Birth

1. We really don't know how many Magi there were. Three gifts were given by the Magi, but the Bible does not tell us how many Magi went to see Christ.
2. The Magi did not go to the manger the night Christ was born. Shepherds visited the newborn baby at the manger, but the Magi did not visit Jesus and his family until later, when they were in a house. Indeed, the Greek work for child in Matthew 2:11, suggests that Jesus was a toddler when visited by the Magi, not an infant.

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3. There is no evidence the Christmas Star shown in the night sky the night Jesus was born in a manger. The Star was seen in the east by the Magi and was later seen by them when they travelled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to visit Jesus in a house.
4. There is no evidence the Magi followed the Star from the east to Israel, or even that the Star persisted all those many months. We only know they saw the Star in the east and again when in Israel. The most noteworthy thing about the Star is that almost no one noted it. Perhaps this is the most important clue. Was God doing something extraordinary with the ordinary?

Important Historical Facts - Understanding What the Scriptures Say

1. Who were the Magi? How did they know the Star signaled the birth of a Jewish king who was also worthy of being worshipped?
 - According to Heroditus, the Magi were Persian and Mede priests. They were of the Zoroastrian religion, which dates to 1600 BC, or earlier. They would have viewed the heavens from Elam or Babylonia.
 - The major tenets of Zoroastrianism include the following. Although not Jews or Christians, they were predisposed to believe.
 - There is only one good, eternal, transcendent God, whom they call Ahura Mazda, who created all things.
 - There are good and evil angels who are at war. The good angels and God will eventually win.
 - Men choose sides in the war and will be judged at the end of time for their actions.
 - A Savior, destined to rescue mankind, would be born to a virgin.
 - Has many ideas not consistent with the Bible.
 - Practiced by Cyrus and Darius, the rulers who knew the prophet Daniel. They were probably aware of the writings of Balaam, who came from Mesopotamia, was highly regarded by the gentiles, and who may have been a Magus. (See **Num 24:17**)
 - The Magi were aware of the prophetic writings of Israel and valued their wisdom.
 - Zoroastrians were early astronomers who believed God's will could be read from the heavens. Indeed, the word "zoroaster" includes the Greek work "aster", or "star".
2. Who was Caesar Augustus and when did he rule?
 - Was the first emperor of the Roman Empire.
 - Lived from September 23, 63 BC until August 19, 14 AD.
3. Who was Quirinius and when did he govern Syria?
 - Quirinius was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, a Roman aristocrat who lived from about 51 BC to about 21 AD.
 - The term Luke uses to describe the office of Quirinius is very general. It merely suggests ruling authority and does not use a Roman legal term.
 - Quirinius was named proconsul to Syria (and Palestine) in 6 AD., when Sentius Saturninus was legate, but the evidence supports Quirinius (Cyrenius) having an official role in ruling Syria twice. The earlier date of his rule in Syria is reported from 3 BC through 1 BC (Theodor Mommsen, *History of Rome*).
4. When was Luke's census taken?
 - Tertullian, an early Church historian, says the census mentioned by Luke's gospel was taken in 2 BC.

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- 2 BC was the Silver Anniversary of the rule of Augustus Caesar and the 750th of the founding of Rome. On February 5, 2 BC, the Roman senate awarded Augustus the title *Pater Patriae* (Father of the Country). The year was marked by year-long celebrations and festivities throughout the empire. Caesar knew of the honor beforehand, and issued an edict requiring empire-wide registration to secure an oath of allegiance to Caesar Augustus. Josephus mentions the requirement for this oath as taking place twelve to fifteen months before the death of Herod (*Antiquities*, XVII, 41-45). An inscription found in Paphlagonia mentions the oath and is clearly dated to 3 BC.
 - These, and other evidence, support the census mentioned by Luke as having taken place from 3 to 2 BC, and would have been the “first census”. A second census is mentioned in **Acts 5:37**, and would have been in 6 AD.
5. Who was Herod and when did he live?
- Herod the Great was a Roman client king of Judea, who lived from 74 BC to 1 BC. An earlier date for Herod’s death (4 BC) has been claimed by some, mainly because Josephus said a lunar eclipse took place just before his death. The lunar eclipse in March 13, 4 BC only involved one-third of the moon and would not have been visible from Israel. There was a full eclipse of the moon visible from Israel on January 10, 1 BC.
 - Another argument has Herod’s death in 4 BC because coins from his realm issued after this date bear images of his successors, but Herod proclaimed his sons as his heirs while he was alive and they were appointed to co-rule with him to establish their legitimacy when he died; the coins were issued while Herod was still alive.
 - Josephus, a Jewish historian from the first century AD, began his book, *The Wars of the Jews*, by stating that there were 167 years from the time Antiochus Epiphanes captured the Jewish Temple until the death of Herod; Antiochus captured the Temple in 167 BC. Herod could not have been born in 4 BC, by this reckoning.
 - From all credible, consistent evidence, it seems Herod the Great died in 1 BC.
6. Are there any early, direct, historical reports of the date of Christ birth?
- Early church fathers and historians, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Orosius, and Cassiodorus Senator said Christ was born in 3 BC.
 - Julius Africanus reckoned Christ’s birth at 3 to 2 BC.
 - Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, Origen, the *Chronicon Cyrinanicum* indicate 2 BC as his birth.

From the historical information mentioned, and from other information, it seems most reasonable to look for astronomical evidence of Christ’s birth from 2 to 3 BC. But what could the Star of Bethlehem have been?

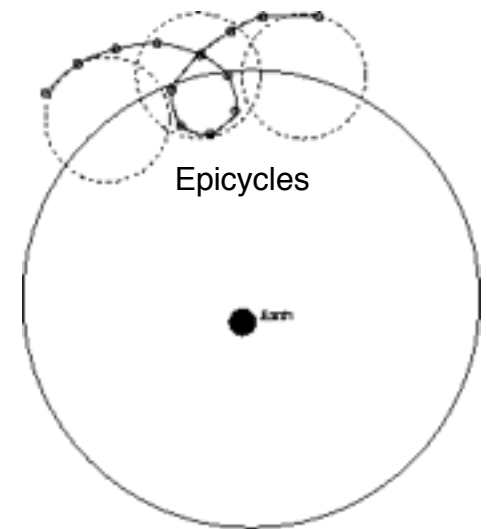
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Important Astronomical Facts - Candidates for the “Star of Bethlehem:

Since we now think we know about when Christ was born -- between 2 and 3 BC -- we need to “search the heavens” for “His star in the east.” Modern sophisticated software can model the night skies from any time or location and some knowledge of astronomy helps us greatly in this effort. Here is a brief summary of what we know about the Star.

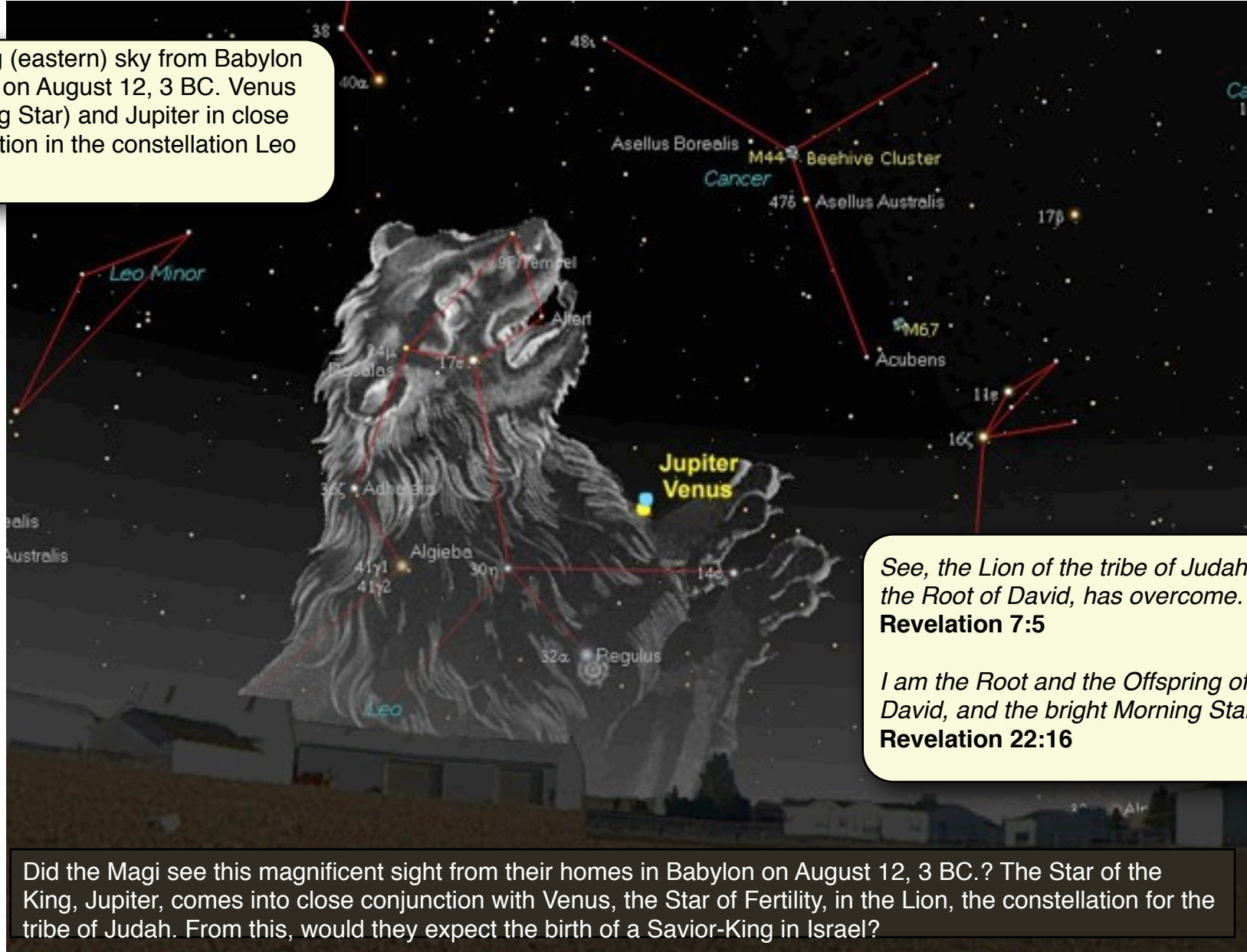
1. It was first seen by the Magi in the eastern skies -- a “morning star”. All stars appear to rise in the east and set in the west as the earth turns from west to east. We know the Magi saw a morning star because they told Herod, “We saw His star in the east . . .” (Matthew 2:2), which in the Greek is best translated “his star in the rising (Greek: *anatolae*) . . .”
2. The star was first seen rising in the morning star. Then, much later, (the time it takes to travel hundreds of miles on foot) it was seen again by the Magi. **There is no evidence that the Star was seen or followed during the months between its two sightings.**
3. It was a **STAR**, specifically called a star (Greek: *astera*); comets were well-known to the ancients and there is another word for a comet, not used in Matthew. Also, no other astronomer in Matthew or Luke’s day records a visible comet from this era.
4. The ancients recognized two kinds of stars -- fixed stars and “wandering stars”, which are really planets. The “fixed stars” do not appear to change their relative positions with respect to one another in the night sky, whereas the planets are “stars” that move among the background of fixed stars each night. Ancient astronomers were able to predict the motion of the planets among the stars, although they thought the earth was the center of the universe and all stars rotated around the earth. Apollonius of Perga first proposed a system to explain the erratic motion of the planet using a system of epicycles in about 300 BC. The ancient astronomers recognized five (5) planets -- Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn -- each of which was usually much brighter than any of the fixed stars. Each “planet star” was given special meaning and its motion among the fixed stars was thought to communicate special knowledge. Planets only move through a narrow band of star constellations, called the zodiac. Each constellation in the zodiac was assigned a special significance by ancient astronomers. That the motion of the stars and planets can determine our destiny is a cult called astrology, which all Christians and Jews condemn. But even the Bible teaches that God can speak to us through the heavens, which He created for His glory.
5. The Christmas star could not have been meteorite (“shooting star”) because these zip across the sky and are gone in seconds. And no astronomer who lived in Jesus’ day wrote about the appearance of a new star -- called a “nova”, by modern astronomers. The appearance of novae were of great importance and would have been noticed and recorded by others.
6. From this analysis of what we can search the skies of 3 and 2 BC for likely Star candidates. Since Jesus called Himself the “Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16) -- which is Venus, it may be informative to pay attention to the behavior of this planet.



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Morning (eastern) sky from Babylon at 5 am on August 12, 3 BC. Venus (Morning Star) and Jupiter in close conjunction in the constellation Leo (Lion).



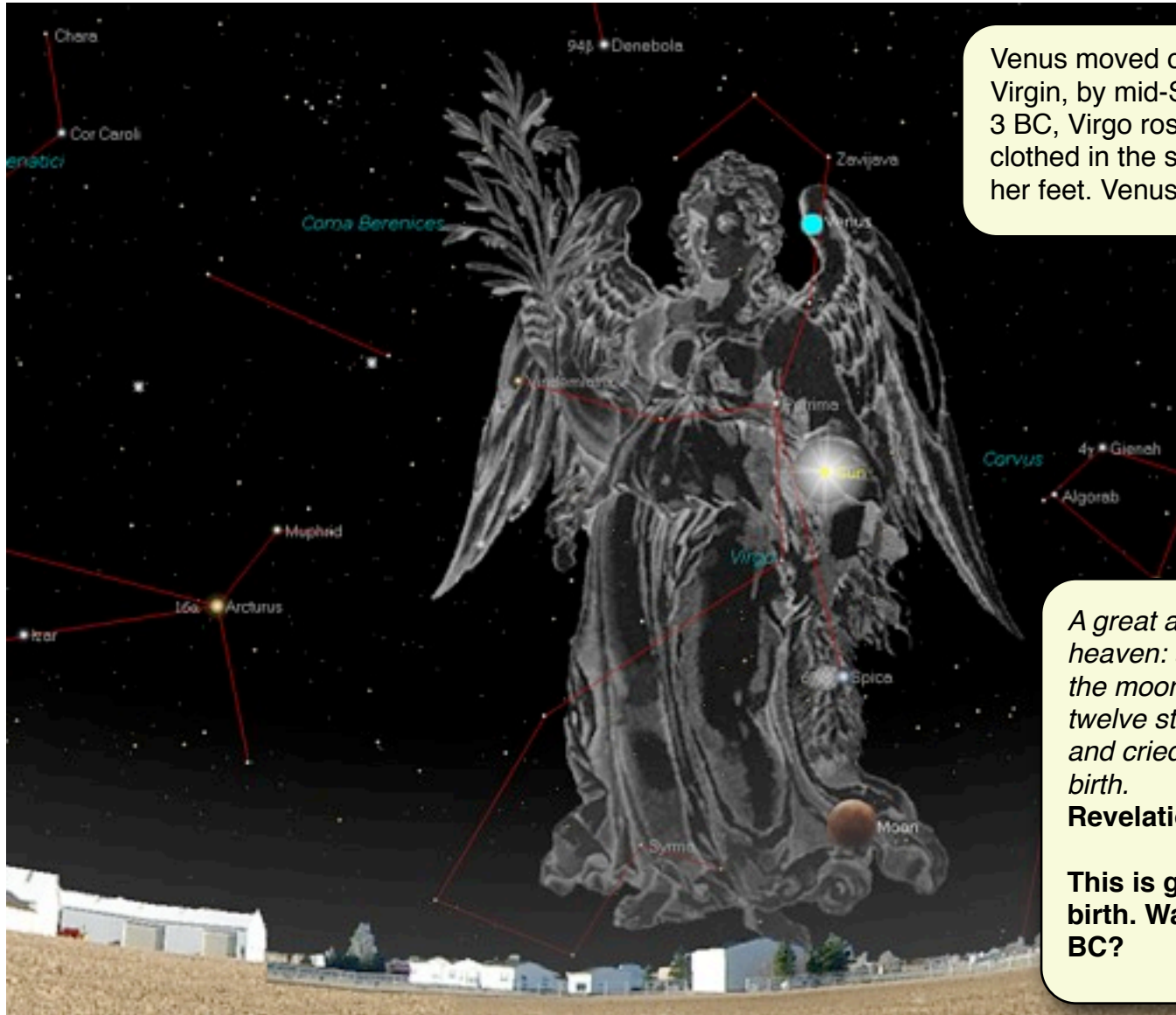
See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome.
Revelation 7:5

I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.
Revelation 22:16

Did the Magi see this magnificent sight from their homes in Babylon on August 12, 3 BC.? The Star of the King, Jupiter, comes into close conjunction with Venus, the Star of Fertility, in the Lion, the constellation for the tribe of Judah. From this, would they expect the birth of a Savior-King in Israel?

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Venus moved out of Leo into Virgo, the Virgin, by mid-September. On September 11, 3 BC, Virgo rose in the morning skies, clothed in the sun; a new moon was seen at her feet. Venus was near her head.

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2 She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.
Revelation 12:1-3

This is given as the sign of the Messiah's birth. Was Jesus born on September 11, 3 BC?

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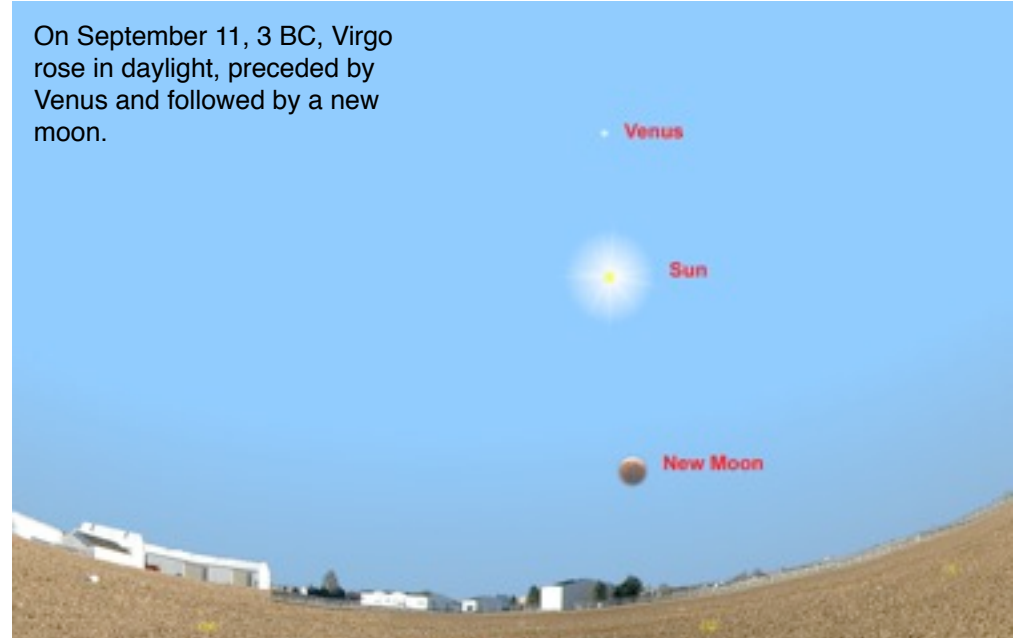
September 11, 3 BC was 1 Tishri 3759, in the Jewish calendar. It was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. Two weeks later, 15 Tishri, began the Feast of Tabernacles, that required Jews to come to Jerusalem to worship and sacrifice in the Temple. Perhaps the Apostle was remembering this day when he wrote "The Word became flesh, and **dwelt** (Greek: *eskaenosen* - tabernacled) among us." (**John 1:14**) The September temperatures in Israel are mild, averaging 61 to 75 degrees F; perfect weather for shepherds to be in the fields with their flocks at night. Finally, recall that there was no room in the inn when Christ was born. If Jesus was born in September, the inns surrounding Jerusalem would have been full because of all the Jewish pilgrims in the area.



If Jesus was born on

September 11, 3 BC, this was not when the Magi visited Him. The Bible says of the Magi, "**On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him . . .**" (*Matthew 2:11*) Jesus was now in a house (Greek: *oikos*), not in the manger (Greek: *phatnae*), and he was now a toddler (Greek: *paidion*), not an infant (Greek: *brephos*). If the Magi first saw the Star from Babylon on August 12, 3 BC, they didn't arrive in Bethlehem until many months later. It would take weeks to prepare for the arduous journey from Babylon to Jerusalem; Jerusalem is about 600 miles from Babylon, as the crow flies. It is more likely they would have taken a route up the Mesopotamian river valley, across to southern Syria, and down the Jordan river valley to Jerusalem. This would have guaranteed them water, food, and civilization en route, while doubling the distance they had to travel, adding months to their journey. We don't know when the Magi left, or how long it took them to make the journey, but if a child becomes a toddler at about 9 or 10 months of age, we can search the Jerusalem skies at this time to see if the Star (merged Venus-Jupiter) reappeared.

On September 11, 3 BC, Virgo rose in daylight, preceded by Venus and followed by a new moon.



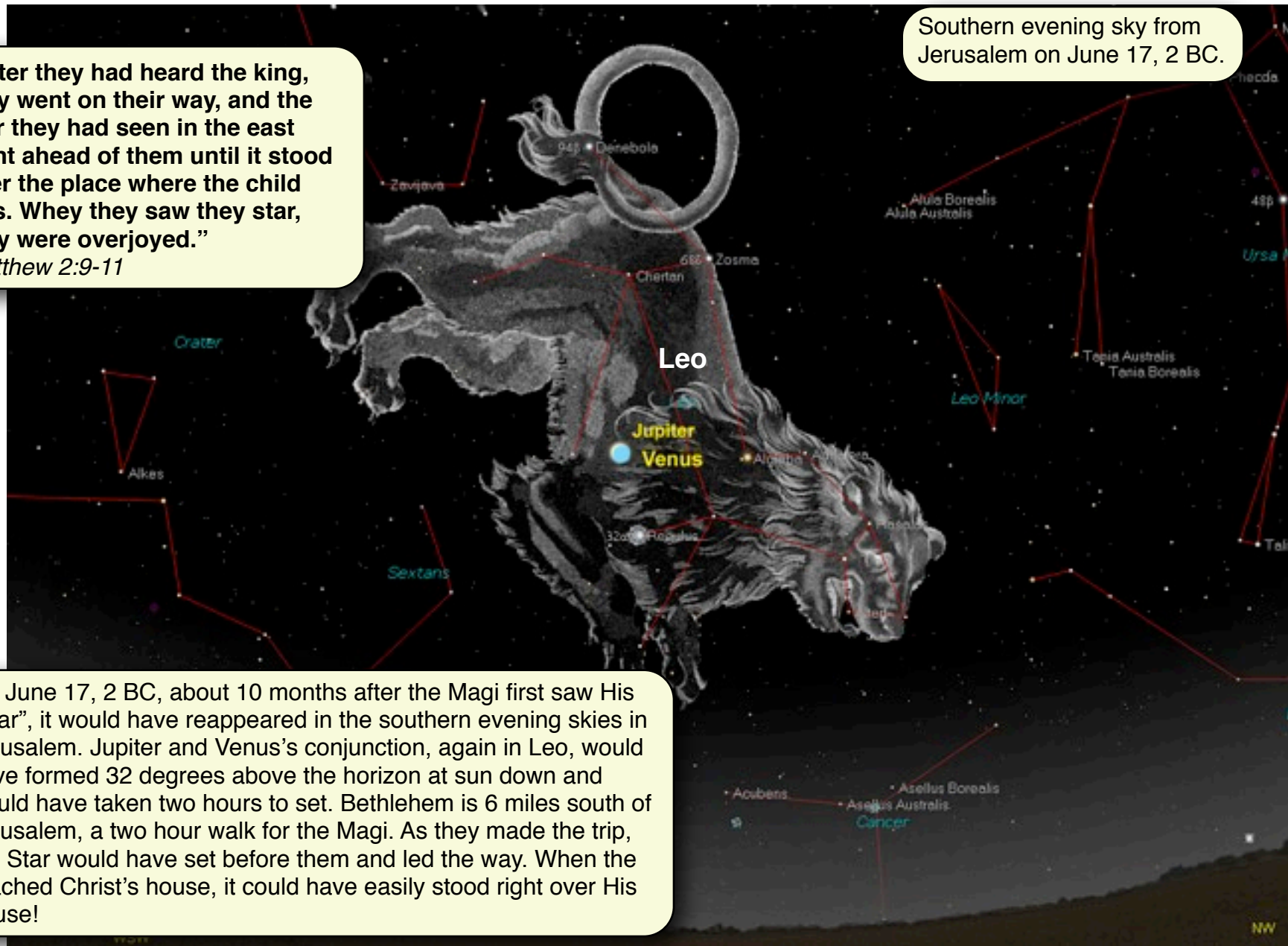
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“After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.”

Matthew 2:9-11

Southern evening sky from Jerusalem on June 17, 2 BC.



On June 17, 2 BC, about 10 months after the Magi first saw His “Star”, it would have reappeared in the southern evening skies in Jerusalem. Jupiter and Venus’s conjunction, again in Leo, would have formed 32 degrees above the horizon at sun down and would have taken two hours to set. Bethlehem is 6 miles south of Jerusalem, a two hour walk for the Magi. As they made the trip, the Star would have set before them and led the way. When they reached Christ’s house, it could have easily stood right over His house!

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The Magi believed they could understand what God was doing from what He was doing in the heavens. They would have been looking at all the astronomical phenomena to find the Messiah's birth. And 3 BC was a year of extraordinary events. In addition to the conjunction of Venus with Jupiter in September 3 BC and June 2 BC, the Magi would have witnessed an extraordinary triple conjunction of Jupiter with Regulus on September 14, 3 BC, February 17, 2 BC, and on May 8, 2 BC. Regulus is the brightest star in the constellation Leo, the Lion Constellation, the sign of the tribe of Judah. Regulus was known as the "King Star" to the ancients. Its modern name also signified this. Finally, on August 27, 2 BC, Jupiter and Mars came into an extremely close conjunction while Venus and Mercury also clustered about these two planets -- all in the constellation Leo.

Some people may argue that a conjunction of planets does not constitute a star. This is true. But I believe Venus is His "star", as Christ Himself says in scripture. It was not the appearance of a new star that alerted the Magi to the coming Christ, it was what His star was doing in their day. If this is true, then we may look into the heavens in our day and see the Star of Bethlehem -- the Morning Star -- Venus! And isn't just like God to do extraordinary things with the ordinary!



Traditional Christmas manger scenes feature an extraordinarily vivid star and three wise men, but this paper argues the Star of Bethlehem was an ordinary "star" (Venus) doing extraordinary things and there were no wise men present at the manger the night Jesus was born.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This paper does not say the stars or planets determine earthly events. It does not support astrology, a cult that believes the heavens determines the fate of men. Instead, this paper asserts that God can and does declare His glory through the heavens to those who are willing and have the faith to see it. In this case, God declared the glory of the coming of the Lord in the heavens, but only the godly, faithful Magi had the wisdom to see and understand it. Finally, isn't it more like God to do something extraordinary with something ordinary?! From dust, He made man. Perhaps, from ordinary planets and stars, God declared the birth of Christ. But this must mean that this plan was set in motion "in the beginning", because the heavens obey God's laws throughout the millennia!