

"Star -- The Mark of Heaven"

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4th Sunday of Advent

Matthew 2:1-2

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This is the fourth message in an Advent series on events during the Birth Story of Jesus. Every Christmas Season hundreds if not thousands of museums and planetariums across the country present a show titled something like "The Star of Bethlehem". As a rule, these presentations draw large crowds of people. I even own a beautifully made presentation on DVD focusing on the various scientific and astronomical feasibilities of this biblical "Star". I have also seen a History Channel or PBS documentary on the "Star of Bethlehem", with numerous scenarios attempting to explain it scientifically.

One writer offers this about the world of science and the "Bethlehem Star"...and for that matter, the entire "birth" story. I hesitate sharing it. However I imagine that at one time or another, we have all heard or read something similar...

QUOTE "...the biblical account of this story is brief, unclear, and subject to multiple interpretations. So meager is the independent historical confirmation, that it's hard to defend the view that the Christmas "Star" is anything more than a fictional or metaphorical fable. ...every physical explanation has serious difficulties. Such speculations have negligible scientific or historical value... Hardly any detail can be regarded as factual."

(from www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/bethstar.htm)

If you are anything like me, such statements are disheartening. Why? Because the world of science and the world of faith are different worlds, each with its own purpose. In general, the biblical accounts of the Birth of Jesus have even suffered (if I may apply that word) at the hands of what one observer calls "theological hard hats", referring to biblical scholars and historians who go after every "dotted 'i' " and every "crossed 't' ". And some of them suggest (or at the least imply) that if we disagree with what they propose, then we have "closed minds".

I suggest it is not that we have "closed minds", but that we have "open faith". There is nothing wrong with biblical scholars doing critical analysis (exegesis) of biblical texts. Their work helps us explore Scripture. Yet many scholars might do

well to look at the biblical texts a bit more closely through the eyes of "mystery" and "faith". Perhaps they do and I fail to notice. Yet I often wonder.

It seems to me that "*thinking* Christians" do not need to "think faith into fact"; that "faith" must eventually trump reason. For example, if I know without a doubt that a flat tire needs air, then there is no mystery and no faith involved. It is a pragmatic, provable fact -- the tire physically requires a substance called air to once again be inflated. On the other hand, if I know that the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb occurred by action of the Holy Spirit, then there is *mystery* and *faith* involved. Why? Because physiologically, human conception requires both a female egg and a male sperm...and a female recipient and a male donor.

The type of conception Mary experienced is "physically" impossible, and therefore requires God's action. And that requires faith. For me, the mystery of God, and Creation and the universe, and the "Word made flesh" are things of "faith". One cannot make genuine "things of faith" suddenly "things of worldly fact" and have them still be "things of faith".

So the "Star of Bethlehem" is a thing of "faith"...born of God as God's mark in heaven for the coming of God's Son.

The Gospel accounts of the Birth were not written to make a "biological assertion" about Jesus. The writers of Matthew and Luke are not concerned with telling us how the conception of Jesus physically took place; meaning, a baby conceived in a woman's womb without the benefit of male sperm. They do not write of "biology" but of "faith".

Matthew does not seek to prove the "Star" with the principals of astronomy or the physical sciences. He conveys the event from the perspective of God's "mystery" and our "faith". Scripture is first and foremost a story of *faith* ... of *theology*; not of science.

For people in 1st and 2nd Century Palestine it was perfectly normal to look for "signs" in the stars. But in today's world, people who do that are often seen as a bit "odd" or "out of the mainstream". Not so in the time of Jesus.

And about this particular "Star", even as early as the Book of Numbers we have mention of it, when the prophetic fellow named Balaam writes this,

Numbers 24:17

"I see Him, but not now.
I behold Him, but not near..
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..."

And this, almost 1,500 years before the coming of Christ!

Moreover, Matthew is not alone in writing of this "Star". Other early Christian writers mention it. For example, the famous Church Father, Ignatius, wrote these words,

"A star shone forth in the heavens,
above all the stars; and its light
was unutterable, and its strangeness
caused amazement... the star itself
far outshone [all others]; and there
was perplexity to know [from where]
came this strange appearance...
when God appeared in the likeness
of man..." (*"To the Ephesians", 19. C.E. 110, Antioch.*)

Maybe one reason why it seems so impossible to believe this is because Jesus' "humanity" also seems impossible to comprehend. The once "Child in the manger" is human in a way none of us are human; and He is divine in a way none of us will ever be divine. So how *do* we begin to fully comprehend such a thing? We cannot. It is simply too mysterious, and requires our *faith*.

Yet the "Star" happened in a way every other star happened...by God's hand, though it was "different" than every other star God created. Everything surrounding Jesus' birth is not about *what* Jesus is, but about *Who* He is. Whether the angel's appearances to Mary and Joseph, or the virgin birth, or the angels singing to the shepherds, or the manger in Bethlehem, or the Star! These are all about *Who* Jesus is. And this is *faith*, not science.

Responding to the comment that we humans are "made in God's image", Mark Twain is said to have responded,

"Yes, and we, being polite and considerate,
returned the favor by creating God
in our image."

*(An adaptation of "Yes, and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor
and created God in his.")*

If we establish the stories surrounding Jesus' birth in our image and according to our understanding, instead of God's, then we miss everything. The Star is God's "Mark in the Heavens": mysterious, inexplicable, incomprehensible, improbable, and incongruent with science.

According to Miriam-Webster, faith is "firm belief and trust in something for which there is no proof." Even more importantly, according to the writer of the New Testament "Letter to the Hebrews" faith is this...

"...the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen..." (*Heb. 11:1*)

We are in not a season of science, but a season of *faith*. So friends...remember your faith and let it shine.

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow...!

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Some of the thoughts here are motivated by sections of the book "The Scandal and the Star" by W. Robert McClelland.