



"THE HEAVENS DECLARE THE GLORY OF GOD"
PSALM 19:1

What's Happening?

MERRY CHRISTMAS from all of us at the Seattle Area RTB chapter. In this issue of our newsletter we provide some thought-provoking articles and resources about Christmas. We hope you enjoy the information.

Another year has literally flown by and it's time to gear up for the new year. We hope to bring you new opportunities to learn more about the Reasons To Believe Ministry and get involved in the local chapter. Our next chapter event is scheduled for Saturday, January 14, where we will be discussing various materials available from RTB for group study. These resources are structured for small groups as well as education and home-schooling environments. We hope you will join us.

Reasons To Believe is at the forefront of trying to reach unbelievers by using science to remove the obstacles to faith in Jesus Christ. Over the past years we have sponsored many outreach events and we plan to continue that effort. The harvest is great, but the workers are few. We ask you to think prayerfully over the holidays about how you might contribute to our local ministry efforts.

As always, we welcome your questions and comments. Contact us at seattle@reasons.org or via our facebook page,  RTB Puget Sound.

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Top 5 Common Christmas Myths

By Sandra Dimas, Assistant Editorial Director RTB

Christmastime is here! For many of us, the holiday brings happiness and cheer and longstanding traditions. One that my family and neighbors participated in when I was a kid was Las Posadas (the inn). Basically a procession of "pilgrims" (neighborhood families) goes house to house asking for lodging. The residents refuse (as planned) and the journey continues until the "innkeeper" takes them in. This festivity serves as a reenactment of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. Plus it comes with plenty of singing, tamale eating, and piñata breaking!

Of course, we all know Mary and Joseph didn't eat tamales or break piñatas, but it turns out there are other elements in this "reenactment" of the nativity (and in many Christmas carols, for that matter) that may not have been part of the real Christmas narrative. Theology Mom Krista Bontrager helps explain a few of these common myths about Christmas and how to "detox ourselves" from embellishing on a perfectly good story.



Many of us were taught that Jesus was born in a stable because "there was no room in the inn." Was He born in a stable?

Probably not. Nowhere in the Bible does it state that Joseph went from home to home looking for a place to stay. That story stems from many translations' use of the word "inn" in Luke 2: 7. From that, we extrapolate a whole slew of events—the innkeeper, innkeeper's wife, a No Vacancy sign flashing. The problem is that the word used in Luke 2 (*kataluma*) is not the word for inn—that's a bad English translation. The word is better translated as "upper room" or "guest room." In fact, the 2011 translation of NIV makes that correction.

Where was Jesus born, then, if not in a stable?

It's much more likely He was born in a home. Mary and Joseph were going to their ancestral home, which means they had extended family there. It's almost inconceivable that their family would not have taken them in considering the cultural practices of that time.

So if Jesus was born in a home, why does the Bible say He was placed in a manger?

That's an important detail because it tells us what part of the house they were in. In those days, homes had an upper level where the family would sleep and a lower level where animals were kept at night for the animals' protection and to provide heat. It seems that Jesus was born in that lower level where the animals were kept. And he was placed in a manger (feed trough) because they make a great cradle.

What about some of the characters often suggested as being present at Christ's birth?

The shepherds were present, but the three wise men were not. Matthew's account apparently takes place during a different time frame than Luke's. One clue is the Greek word that Matthew used to describe Jesus is a *paidion*, which can mean anything from an infant to a toddler. This range would be consistent with King Herod killing all the Jewish boys two and under (Matthew 2). This would mean Jesus was probably two or younger when visited by the wise men.

Okay, so we've eliminated the stable and the wise men from the Nativity. What about the date? Was Jesus born on December 25?

Maybe. The standard story is that December 25 was adopted after Constantine's conversion to Christianity because it was on a pagan holiday and the winter solstice. Christians then co-opted the holiday and Christianized it. What's interesting is that the early church put almost no emphasis on celebrating the birth of Christ. They were much more concerned with the resurrection. It's not until AD 200 where possible dates are mentioned for the celebrating of Christ's birth. By about AD 300 there were two dates: December 25 (for the west) and January 6 (for the east). There does seem to be a tradition of December 25 long before Constantine's conversion, so that's why I say maybe. An article from the *Biblical Archaeology Review* gives a good summary of "How December 25 Became Christmas."

So what would you like to say to those who might (facetiously) say this information ruins Christmas for them, or at least shakes up some sentimental traditions?

I think the shepherds are a definite key to Luke's story. Shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder, down there with the eunuchs in how they were perceived by their fellow Jews. Having handled animal feces and carcasses, they were dirty and considered ceremonially unclean. In order to worship in the temple, they would have to go through multiple days of cleaning rituals. Yet the Angel tells the shepherds to run to Bethlehem and see the Savior. The Angel doesn't say "oh, and on your way you might want to get cleaned up first." No, the shepherds go right there and see God Incarnate. Then they spread the word that Jesus had been born. God chose people at the bottom of the social ladder to be the first evangelists. That, to me, is Luke's point. It's the shepherds' ability to run to the Savior without any ritual or cleaning. This is a Savior for them—these dirty people. It's the same for the wise men. They were Gentiles, but Christ is a Savior for them, too. They go to Bethlehem and bow down to worship God Incarnate. It's the very beginnings of the revolution that Jesus will bring. HE is now the temple, the sacrifice, the Great High Priest, the replacement for all of the things the Old Testament foreshadowed.

Bible & Science In the News

■ The Christmas Star

RTB has set-up a special webpage dedicated to the Christmas star. Included are article by Hugh Ross and Jeff Zweerink, an audio discussion by the RTB scholars, several videos discussing scientific and theological aspects of the star, and even a blog where you can express your opinion. Go to www.reasons.org/christmasstar.

■ How December 25 Became Christmas

This article from *Biblical Archaeology Review* discusses explores how December 25 came to be associated with Jesus' birthday. It states that Christmas was not celebrated until about the 4th century A.D., with December 25th as the tradition in the western Roman Empire and January 6 in the east. Go to: www.bib-arch.org/e-features/christmas.asp.

■ Is Christmas Pagan?

This article by Greg Koukl of Stand to Reason examines the claim that the practice of Christmas is illegitimate because there were pagan elements that were originally associated with a celebration at this time of year. What separates the two, he contends, is the meaning of Christmas. Go to www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5172.

■ Advent Meditation

This *Breakpoint* article by Anne Provencher discussed the importance of recognizing the meaning of Advent. Doing so, she says, brings more meaning to Christmas because Advent is about humanity wandering in darkness awaiting the promised savior. Go to www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/articles/entry/12/18022.

■ What Kids Really Want for Christmas

This tothesource article features an interview with Christian Smith, a renowned sociologist of American religion. Smith contends that kids want to know what adults believe and why, and offers several suggestions for parents to help kids understand the substance of their religious traditions. Go to: www.tothesource.org/12_21_2011/12_21_2011.htm.

We Three Kings

By Maureen Moser, Editor RTB

One Christmastime, Dad surprised the family with a new Nativity scene. The set featured a stylized cherry-wood stable and a host of beautiful porcelain figurines. There was the angel with golden wings and a trumpet held aloft, Mary clad in lavender and blue as she kneeled over Baby Jesus, surrounded by animals galore. But my favorites were the three wise men. It wasn't very theological of me, but I couldn't help thinking they were the loveliest of the bunch, dressed in vibrant robes and exotic headdresses. Even their camel was decked out with colorful tassels.



Perhaps it has to do with efforts to dispel myths about the Magi and the star they followed (I know my pastor gets annoyed by these misconceptions), but I don't actually hear much about these guys in Christmas sermons. I do hear about the shepherds. They were a lowly group—they probably smelled terrible and likely didn't receive extensive

educations. The Magi were the exact opposite: wealthy, educated, and foreign. No doubt they were among the intellectual elites of their culture. I think we miss out on some important insights when we overlook the Magi.

Paying Attention

The story of the Magi says something about the value of intellectual pursuits to personal faith. In an article on the Christmas star, Hugh Ross notes that it's likely the Magi were influenced by the teachings of Daniel, the only OT prophet to predict the timing of the Messiah's arrival.

So these guys were paying attention when the "star" appeared. Hugh points out that the Christmas star is not recorded anywhere outside the Bible—it was just noticeable enough to alert the wise men, but no one else it seems. No one else was paying attention.

According to Matthew 2, when the wise men showed up in Jerusalem, they caused quite a stir by asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Based on the reactions of King Herod and his people, it seems that this information took everyone by surprise even though they had access to all the Messianic prophecies. The wise men were Gentiles, yet they were prepared, and they knew what they were looking for. They had done their homework.

Fully Prepared

To me, the Magi serve as a subtle reminder to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

soul and with all your mind." It's a struggle sometimes to love God as Jesus commanded and as the wise men demonstrated. The loving-God-with-all-our-minds part seems especially neglected. We overemphasize emotional intimacy in our worship services or poke fun at those stodgy old theologians or just don't bother studying Scripture for more than a "verse of the day." I say "we" because I struggle with this all the time. But, as the story of the Magi illustrates, the rewards of preparing ourselves intellectually are ample.

Hugh concludes his Christmas star article,

What strikes me as the most important point of the story is its illustration of the hope the magi placed in the promised Messiah. When I consider the magnitude of their commitment of time, energy, and treasure to seeking him out in order to bow before him, I pray that my response and yours will match theirs.

As we continue moving forward into the twenty-first century, with all its cultural challenges, I hope with Hugh that we will be more and more like the wise men: attentive and prepared and eager to respond when God calls on us.

What Was the Christmas Star?

By Sandra Dimas, Assistant Editorial Director RTB

Various theories and perspectives abound over what it was that led the wise men to the Christ child. So how does one find clarity in the haze of varied viewpoints? Here's where having access to astronomers comes in handy. (It comes in handy other times, too.)

Hugh Ross explains that the word translated as "star" in Matthew 2 could mean any kind of heavenly body: a star, planet, galaxy, meteor, comet, asteroid, shooting star. It is in the singular, so it's referring to a single object in the sky. Also, a lot of time had passed between the star's first and second appearance—something like 15–30 months, Hugh suggests. Finally, the "star" had to be spectacular enough to set the Magi in motion yet not too spectacular as to be noticeable by the average observer or by astronomers and astrologers in Egypt, Greece, India, and China. Hugh explains,

King Herod and the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem seemed oblivious to the star (Matthew 2:1–3). The shepherds outside of Bethlehem "keeping watch over their flocks at night" on the eve of the Messiah's birth made no note of any astonishingly brilliant star (Luke 2:8–20).

In "What was the Christmas star?" Hugh takes a look at the popular explanations through the lens of science to see which best fits the criteria for the Christmas star. The star must be: (1) a single object, (2) rare in its occurrence,

- (3) not so spectacular as to be obvious to all, and
- (4) able to appear, disappear, and reappear.

The Comet Hypothesis

Comets are fairly common and would not garner special attention from the careful observer. Unusual comets would have been well-documented by Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, and Greek astronomers. Yet there's no record of an unusual comet having occurred at the estimated time of Christ's birth. Moreover, though a comet can orbit the Sun, it would not reappear in the same place and form.

The Supernova Hypothesis

A supernova event would be so spectacular as to catch the attention of even the casual observer, yet again there is no record of such an event occurring at the time of Christ's birth. Moreover, a star could not "go supernova" twice—it's one and done—so it would not have reappeared.

The Conjunction Hypothesis

Conjunctions, whether between two planets or a planet and star, are also fairly common. Any conjunction that may have occurred could well have been uncommon enough to motivate the Magi to begin their journey. The conjunction hypothesis that has received much attention recently (via Rick Larson's popular DVD, *The Star of Bethlehem*) points to encounters between Jupiter and Venus in 2 and 3 BC and between Jupiter and Regulus (a star) in that same time period. These conjunctions fail to meet the first criterion because each involved two objects, and Matthew 2 uses aster in the singular. More importantly, these conjunctions occurred after Herod died, and we know from Matthew's account that Herod was still alive when Christ was born.

So if the Christmas star wasn't a comet, supernova, or conjunction, then what was it? Hugh leans toward the idea that it was a recurring nova: a single object, sufficiently rare yet not too spectacular, and it appears, disappears (after initial explosion), then reappears (second explosion) 1–2 years later. Yet he stresses that this is only one plausible explanation; no one can claim to have positive proof.

What's important is that these wise men appear to have paid careful attention to Daniel's prophecy (9:24–27) of the coming Messiah and were ready to journey at all cost when the time came. What do you think?



Seattle Chapter Reasons To Believe

Who Are We?

The Seattle Chapter of Reasons To Believe is a local extension of the worldwide, interdenominational Reasons To Believe ministry. We exist to support our parent organization and foster local involvement in the ministry. We serve the Puget Sound and are composed of Christians of different ages and backgrounds.

It is our conviction the same God who created the universe inspired the Bible. Therefore, God's Word must agree with the facts of nature. We reject the notion that science and the Bible are at odds and provide a scientifically-sound and Biblically-faithful alternative to Darwinism and young-Earth creationism.

What Do We Do?

Our mission is to remove the doubts of skeptics and strengthen the faith of believers. We provide scientific, historical and philosophical evidence that supports the Christian worldview and helps remove barriers to a belief in God, the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We carry out this mission by:

- Helping people access RTB and other scientifically and biblically sound resources.
- Bringing nationally-known speakers into the area to promote the scientific reliability of the Bible.
- Assembling a team of local apologists to address questions about science and the Bible.
- Building alliances with local churches, ministries and groups to maximize the exposure of RTB.
- Reaching out to unbelievers with gentleness and respect, to expose them to God's word.

We welcome your involvement and support. For more information, contact us at seattle@reasons.org. Tax-deductible donations can be sent to: Seattle RTB, PO Box 99683, Seattle, WA 98139-0683.

Questions? Get Answers.

If you're looking for scientific support for your faith or answers to questions about God, the Bible, and science, contact us at seattle@reasons.org. Or call the RTB hotline seven days a week, 5:00 to 7:00 PM at 626-335-5282.