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## A BROADER COMPARATIVE CIVILIZATIONS APPROACH TO THE BIBLE'S NATIVITY STORY

Milo and Sean Kearney

Perhaps no field of study provides a better illustration of the distortions which can arise from cultural myopia than Bible history. Failure to consider biblical prophecy in the light of the religious traditions of all neighboring lands has been one cause of confusion. This article will investigate the Bible's nativity stories as a case in point.

Fulfilment or fairy tale? The Bible's nativity stories are often cited as evidence that the Scriptures are fictitious. It is pointed out that the two versions of the birth of Jesus, found in Matthew 1:18–2:18 and Luke 2:26–38 and 2:1–21, are so different and include such fantastic and colorful elements (notably the wise men, the guiding star, the shepherds, the manger, and the virgin birth) that one can plainly see that the accounts had to be invented.<sup>1</sup> In support of this viewpoint, it is asked why, although both Matthew and Luke wrote of the virgin birth, Matthew told only about the wise men and the star, while Luke "forgot" to include them, and told only about the shepherds and the manger. Were they writing fact or fiction? In favor of the former, it might be suggested that Matthew, as a Hebrew tax collector,<sup>2</sup> was interested in the great wealth of the wise men, guided by the star, and might have missed the importance of the shepherds. Luke, as a doctor and a poet, could have been more interested in the gentler touch of the shepherds and the humble manger.<sup>3</sup> Again, it can be posited that Matthew, who according to tradition wrote his gospel in Eastern Syria,<sup>4</sup> possibly in the Hebrew language,<sup>5</sup> was in closer contact with the Persian Gulf world of the magi with their study of the stars. Luke, as a Greek,<sup>6</sup> writing in Greek, would have been less concerned with them. Yet the investigation needs to go beyond such speculation about cultural influences.

Two main schools of thought label the nativity stories as fiction. One school sees them mainly as poetic invention; the other views them as contrived prophecy. Among the writers who hold the accounts to be poetic invention, some believe they derived from folklore (the Literary School of interpretation of David Friedrich Strauss, a student of Rationalist Friedrich Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin, influenced by the Grimm brothers, in 1838). The narratives have been called deliberate idealizations that combine legendary figures of Israel and Greece, the two cultures co-existing in Palestine under the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup> Another branch of the poetic school has seen the stories as a fully original literary invention by the Gospel writers (Redaktionsgeschichte or Redaction Criticism, born in Germany after World War II and shaped by Gunther Bornkamm writing on Matthew, Hans Conzelmann writing on Luke, and Willi

Marxsen writing on Mark).<sup>8</sup>

The school of contrived prophecy maintains that the nativity stories are manipulative attempts to make it seem that Jesus' birth fit pre-existing prophecies. This is the contention of Formgeschichte or Form Criticism, which appeared in Germany after World War I and was shaped by the Gnostic-influenced writers Rudolph Bultman and Martin Dibelius, among others. This approach is also found in Hugh Schofield's *The Passover Conspiracy*.<sup>9</sup>

We can find evidence against the above arguments by a broader comparative civilizations approach which steps outside Palestine and the entire Roman Empire, to look at the enemy territory of Persia. The colorful elements of the story (the wise men, the new star, the shepherds, the virgin birth, the new-born king, and even the date of 25 December) were all found in Iranian prophecy or tradition. The only seeming exception is the absence of a prophecy regarding a feeding trough, but this can be maintained to have been linked to the Iranian savior god prophecy of a cave, as will be explained below.

Once these prophecies are brought to light, it becomes clear that the nativity stories were not a new invention as Redaktion Criticism contends. Since the main elements were all found previously in prophecy, it would have been too great a coincidence had they been developed independently for literary effect. Nor were the nativity stories based on folklore, as the Literary School maintains, since the antecedents are found in specific religious prophecies rather than in folk tales. At any rate, it is unlikely that writers so interested in prophecy and emphasizing the importance of the truth would have used the material simply to tell a good story. Furthermore, if the two stories had been intended as a literary effort, they would hardly have contained their long genealogies, which do not make good literature, but are useful for documentation. The fact that the two genealogies differ from each other shows that this is true documentation, as genealogies of two branches of the same family often disagree. Matthew, as a tax-collector, and Paul (the source for Luke) as a former prosecuting witness of the Christians, would both have been likely to have researched Jesus' birth and line, but with different sources.

Nor can these stories have been a manipulation of prophecy, since the wise men, the star, the shepherds, the feeding trough (indirectly as a cave), and the twenty-fifth of December were all part of the prophecy or tradition, not of Hebrew, but of Persian culture. Even if the Iranian prophecies were known by Matthew and Luke, which is far from certain, they were not accepted as legitimate in Hebrew tradition, so that they were of no use as manipulated prophecy to the writers or their audience. At any rate, if Matthew and Luke had wanted to use these elements as fulfilment of prophecy, they would surely have said so. Both of their Gospels strive to validate how Jesus fulfilled prophecy. Matthew 1:22 quotes Isaiah 7:14 on the Virgin birth; Matthew 2:5 quotes Micah 5:1 on Bethlehem as the place of birth; Matthew 2:14-15 quotes Hosea 11:1 on the

return from Egypt; and Matthew 2:17–18 quotes Jeremiah 31:15 on the massacre of the infants. Luke 22:37 has Jesus saying he must fulfill Isaiah 53:12.

The objection might be raised that the Gospel writers knew that the Jews would protest to non-Hebrew prophecies and therefore might have wanted to hint at their fulfillment without drawing too much attention to them. However, Matthew and Luke were not using the Iranian prophecy systematically, as is shown by the fact that they broke off different elements of the Iranian prophecy from their setting. Matthew told of the wise men with their star-gazing, while Luke told of their prophecies of the shepherds and the manger (linked to the Iranian cave). Had they known the Iranian prophecy and grasped its significance as such, they would surely have conveyed it intact. It would have been less likely that the elements of a prophecy understood as such would have been split apart than for this to have happened with historical recollections. Recollections typically are selective of certain elements, taking them out of their full context. Thus the story was not shaped around the prophecy, as the Form Criticism School contends.

It might be asked if it is consistent with Scripture to hold that God would have chosen to reveal Himself in prophetic form to people other than the Jews. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no man comes to the father except by me." However, in Numbers 22:6–12, God speaks through the non-Jewish prophet Balam of Northwestern Mesopotamia. Again in Acts 10:1–6, God sends an angel to tell the Roman Centurion Cornelius to send for Peter for instruction.

The full meaning and plausibility of the different exotic elements of Matthew and Luke's Nativity stories fall into place as necessary parts of a total picture only when they are considered together in the context of the Iranian prophecy. To explain how each piece plays its role in completing a historical puzzle requires looking at these elements as they would have come into play one after the other.

The first of the prophesied elements we will examine are the wise men. How can it be shown that they were not an invention? Who were these *magoi*, as they are called in the Greek New Testament? The Greek term *magoi* refers particularly to the Iranian and Mesopotamian Zoroastrian priests.<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:1 says that "there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem." Matthew 2:9 refers to "the star, which they saw in the east." This cannot mean that the star was in the eastern skies, because the same text says that the star "went before them until coming it stood over where was the child," from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, meaning it was in the southern sky. Due to the barrier placed on civilization by deserts as one moves east from the Mediterranean coast of the Levant, only Iran and Iraq fit the bill. India was too remote at that period, and had no magi tradition. Clement of Alexandria and other Church fathers believed the magi were Persian, and the Church of the Nativity built in Bethlehem by Constantine contained a

mosaic showing them in Persian dress.<sup>11</sup>

Daniel, the only prophet who dates the coming of the Messiah (in Daniel 9:25–28), was considered a wise man (magi) by the Babylonians and Persians. He was the chief wise man of the Babylonian Empire and also later the chief wise man and prime minister of the Persian Empire. The magi of the Persian Empire descended from the tradition of Daniel and would have been familiar with his writings.<sup>12</sup> Zarathustra, the founder of the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition underlying the rise of Shah Kuravaush (Cyrus), predicted the coming of the Messiah, according to a patristic belief.<sup>13</sup> A biblical stamp of approval is given to the Zoroastrian Shah in Ezra 1:2, where Cyrus proclaims that Yahweh gave him his empire and ordered him to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

Many Zoroastrian teachings, including elements found in the *Zend Avesta* or *Book of Love*, were consonant with those of Judaism. The Zarathustrian Mithraites looked forward to the coming of the creator god Ormuz/Ahura Mazda, who would be born on earth as Mithra — a savior god of light, a champion of truth, loyalty and virtue. In similar terminology, Isaiah 9:6 says the Savior will be called "God with us" (Immanuel), "Wonderful," "Counselor," "Mighty God," "Eternal Father," and "Prince of Peace." Isaiah 53 proclaims he will be a man of peace, saying, "He did no violence or deceit." Mithra was referred to as a member of a Trinity, the three gods shown standing as one sun-god grouping with lighted torches, bringing the light of the world to humankind. Mithra was also called the Avestan or the "Loving One."<sup>14</sup> This view of Mithra conforms to the prophecies of the Tanach that Ha-Messiah would be God Himself in one aspect come to earth as a man. The Trinity may be referred to in Genesis, which in the Hebrew combines a plural noun for God with a singular verb (although there are other Hebrew nouns which share this oddity) and in the Greek uses a singular noun for God with a plural verb.

According to Iranian teaching, Mithra grown to manhood would not marry, but devote himself to the salvation of humankind. He would go into the desert, and on his return preach a message of brotherly love. He would baptize people, washing away their sins. The Mithraites held an anticipatory baptism by water to represent this expectation.<sup>15</sup> Mithra was to hold an important last supper with his disciples, which would symbolize that Mithra would slay the bull (of sin). The snake and scorpion (symbols of Ahriman, the Iranian Satan) were shown biting at the sexual organs of the bull, pulling it down. Mithra himself is often personified in the bull and thus was sacrificing himself, to resurrect in order to give his followers eternal life. In anticipation of this event, the central Mithraite ritual was the sacrifice of a bull on an altar. The bull's meat and blood were consumed by the worshippers.<sup>16</sup>

Mithra was expected to give his followers the gift of immortal life, righteousness, and peace in a resurrection of the dead at a Last Judgement.<sup>17</sup> Another way this was expressed was that Mithra was to provide his devotees with eternal

waters.<sup>18</sup> This, too, conforms to Tanach teachings. It was revealed to David that the Messiah would die but then be resurrected from the dead. Psalm 16:9–10 says that God will not leave his Holy One in Hell or to decay. Psalm 110:1–2 goes on to say that the Messiah will then ascend to heaven, where it states, "The Lord says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I conquer your enemies."

The sign of Mithra was the cross. Mithraites made the sign of the cross on their foreheads in ashes.<sup>19</sup> The cross is a universal symbol for the Savior God, found in the worship of Anu/Enlil in ancient Mesopotamia, of Quetzalcoatl in Mexico, and of Kukulkán in Guatemala, among other examples. One explanation of this symbol is that it signifies the cross-roads of life, with the horizontal arm denoting the choice of continued worldly emphasis and the vertical arm a rise to higher spiritual existence.<sup>20</sup> However, there is no reason it could not have been a vague universal foreshadowing of the cross of Calvary. To David it had been revealed that the Messiah would be put to death by crucifixion (a form of execution only later introduced by the Assyrians). Psalm 22:1–18, which was seen by the Yalkut, a collection of ancient Rabbinical traditions, as a prophecy of the Messiah's death, says, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? [in anguish over the separation from God as Yeshua assumed all human sins on the Cross]. I am poured out like water, my bones are out of joint and my heart is like wax, melted inside me. My tongue cleaves to my jaws. Dogs [i.e. gentiles] surround me and pierce (órixan in the Septuagint, from the Hebrew *caaru*, but *caari* or "like a lion" in the Masoretic text) my hands and my feet. They divide my garments and cast lots for my clothing." Psalm 69:21 adds, "They gave me vinegar to drink." The instructions for the Paschal lamb indicate that no bone would be broken. (Exodus 12:46)

The Zoroastrian magi would have been familiar with Daniel's dating of the Messiah's death and hence the generation of his birth. Daniel wrote that the Messiah would be put to death on 30 March 33 A.D. — which was the start of the Passover. Daniel 9:24–27 says that at the end of 7 weeks + 62 weeks after the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, the Messiah will be cut off (i.e. killed). The 69 weeks were understood in the ancient Jewish prophetic system to refer to 69 weeks of years or 69 seven-year periods. The Hebrew word for week is *shabúa* and literally means "seven." This signifies that the idea of 69 weeks is 69 sevens. The Jews were familiar with a seven of both days and years. Leviticus 25:2–4 illustrates this usage by speaking of the land lying fallow every seventh year, and Leviticus 25:8 shows that there was a multiple of a week of years, saying, "Count off seven sabbaths of years — seven times seven years — so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of 49 years."

Furthermore, Daniel had been thinking in terms of years and multiples of seven earlier, in Daniel 9:1–2. The events in Daniel 9:24 could never have transpired in 490 days. Thus the 69 weeks equal 69 X 7 or 483 prophetic years. The beginning of the dating of the 483 years was in 444 B.C. There were sever-



al commandments or decrees which have been suggested as the start of the 69 weeks, including Cyrus' decree in 539 B.C. (Ezra 1:1-4); Darius' decree in 519 B.C. (Ezra 5:3-7); Artaxerxes' decree to Ezra in 457 B.C. (Ezra 7:11-16); and Artaxerxes' decree to Nehemiah in 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 2:1-8). However, of these four dates, only the fourth fits the description. All the others refer to the rebuilding of the Temple, not of the city. Nehemiah 2 tells how Nehemiah was deeply grieved over Jerusalem's desperate condition, with the city lying waste and its gates burned. Artaxerxes in response granted him permission to rebuild Jerusalem, in 444 B.C., the twentieth year of his reign (which started in 465 B.C.).

These 483 years are prophetic years of 360 days each. This equals 173,880 days or 476 solar years (plus 140 days, or something over four months). Counting 476 solar years from 444 B.C. brings the date to 33 A.D. (because you have to add in one year for having both 1 A.D. and 1 B.C., there being no year zero). Since there is no date given for the decree, Jewish custom dated it from the first day of the month, or 1 Nissan 444 B.C., which equals the fifth of March 444 B.C. in our revised calendar. By multiplying the 476 solar years by 365.24219879 or by 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45.975 seconds (there being 365 1/4 days in a year) one comes to 173,855 days, 6 hours, 52 minutes, and 44 seconds, or 173,855 days. This leaves only twenty-five days left over, which added to the fifth of March comes to the thirtieth of March of 33 A.D., which was Nisan 10 in the Hebrew calendar for 33 A.D.<sup>21</sup>

The magi thus knew the year of the Messiah's death, and could calculate the generation of his birth. However, how could they know the exact year he would be born? To do this, they needed a sign, and this is where the star became essential. A star is mentioned in Hebrew prophecy, but without an explicit reference to it being a heavenly body intended to herald the Savior's birth. In Numbers 24:17, Balaam says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel"...and then it talks about a conqueror of all the sons of Seth (i.e. all Adam's descendents through Noah, or all humankind). Famous for their study of the stars, and convinced that important events on earth were heralded by events in the heavens, of which the birth of the Savior God was the most significant, the magi would certainly have been scouring the skies in search of the special new star exactly at this time.

In the Septuagint, the Greek word given for star is *astron* and in the Massoretic text the Hebrew word is *kochav*. The Greek word used in Matthew's gospel for the star, *astéra*, can refer to any kind of heavenly body giving off light seen by the naked eye.<sup>22</sup> There are several theories as to what this *astéra* might have been. Most of these theories seem unconvincing. Meteors are too common, occurring once every few weeks. Novas (smaller stellar explosions, which can be seen only at night) are not spectacular. Super-novas occur once

every 50 to 100 years, but should have been recorded in more than one place.<sup>23</sup> It is also suggested that the star may have been God's own light (shekina glory) or that of an angel. In Revelation 1, *astéra* is used as a symbol for an angel, but the text in Matthew indicates a literal reading.<sup>24</sup> Halley's Comet appeared in 12–11 B. C., somewhat early for the circumstances of Jesus' birth.<sup>25</sup>

More importantly, ancient tradition linked the coming birth of the Savior God with an alignment of planets as seen from the earth. Plato's *Politicus* sees major changes in the movement of planets as heralding the return of the original Golden Age of the Creator God, and connects them with man's search for "the true shepherd...him who is alone worthy to receive this appellation, because he alone...has the care of human beings...the divine shepherd."<sup>26</sup> Only one major development in planet movements would seem that unusual as seen from earth: an alignment of planets which briefly would seem to create a new larger star as they merged to the human eye. That Plato was interested in exactly this phenomenon is evidenced by his description of planet alignment in his *Timaeus*.<sup>27</sup> Several such alignments occurred in the years 7 B.C. to 1 B.C. Planets only rarely align so close to each other as to seem to form one star.<sup>28</sup>

Werner Keller, a member of the Rationalist school first founded by Johann Gottfried Herder at Weimar, in *The Bible as History* suggests that the star was formed by the alignment of Jupiter (sign of a king) and Saturn (signifying Jehovah and Israel) which occurred in December of 7 B.C. in the sign of Pisces (standing for the Mediterranean lands in Chaldean tradition and for Israel in Hebrew tradition, as well as for the beginning of the new Zodiacal Age of Pisces). These planets were merged in the southern sky in the evening, so that they would have drawn Iranian astrologers to the south.<sup>29</sup> The first conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. occurred on 29 May; a second on 3 October, and a third on 4 December.<sup>30</sup> At the third conjunction, the two planets seemed to be merged into one great star, shining in the evening in the southern sky.<sup>31</sup>

The year 7 B.C. is in line with the Gospels. Matthew 2:1 says Herod was king (Herod the Great, because Matthew 2:22 says he was later succeeded by Archelaus), and Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. Furthermore, Luke 2:2 says that Quirinius was Governor of Syria at the time, and Quirinius was governor there in the years just prior to 4 B.C. and again from 6 to 9 A.D.<sup>32</sup> The dating of our calendar from Jesus' birth was the work of the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus in Rome in 533 A.D. Dionysius' estimate of the year of Jesus' birth is now believed to have been inaccurate.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the star would have brought the magi to Palestine, but once there, how would they have known what town to visit? The Bible story makes sense that they would have gone to Herod's court to get further clues as to the exact location. Herod's wise men would have told him that Micah 5:2, written in ca. 750 B.C., foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: "The one who dates from eternity who will rule Israel will come from Bethlehem."<sup>34</sup>



Yet once in Bethlehem (five miles to the south with ca. 1,000 residents),<sup>34</sup> how did they know where to go? The Iranian prophecy told the magi to look for a cave. The manger, referred to in Luke 2:12 as a sign, can be connected with the Iranian tradition that Mithra was to be born in a cave. Mithraic services were held in caves in honor of this expectation. When caves were not at hand, they built cave-like shrines with domed roofs to approximate caves. They called these buildings *aveh*, or caves.<sup>35</sup> Coincidentally, the Greeks also connected the birth of the savior god with a cave in the Greater Eleusinian Mysteries — outside of Athens, the most prestigious mystery rites in the Ancient World.<sup>36</sup> The site centers on a shallow cave formed by a cliff overhang where Persephone (a Greek Eve) fell into the Underworld of Pluto (Satan) and was given hope of resurrection (symbolized by the return of the spring), despite having eaten the fruit of the pomegranate (= the apple), which gave Pluto/Satan a claim on her.<sup>37</sup> In commemoration of the Fall, pigs (symbols of sin), along with dough figures of men (for Adam) and snakes (for Satan), were thrown over the cliff at Eleusis to their deaths. Live snakes (representing Pluto/Satan) were kept at the bottom, which would then feed off the pig corpses (Satan devouring humans fallen into sin).<sup>38</sup> The Eleusinian Mysteries taught the hope of eternal life through a savior god who would be as a human baby.<sup>39</sup> The initiation rites centered on a play presenting a symbolic child who portrayed the role of the savior god every year at Eleusis.<sup>40</sup> Further, an annual announcement of the expectation of the birth of the savior god was given as the reason for the "mysterion."<sup>41</sup>

To Katalimati, the word used for "the inn" in Luke 2:7, means a place a traveler lays down his baggage.<sup>42</sup> Not being able to go into such a shelter for people, Joseph and Mary laid Jesus when he was born in a manger (*fatni* or feeding trough). Bethlehem is built on a high limestone ridge, in a karst topography with many caves. Once used as primitive homes, the caves still offered suitable shelter as stables for the animals. The stable of Jesus's lodging thus could have been a cave.<sup>43</sup> The oldest surviving Armenian translation of Matthew 2:9 adds that the star stopped over a cave.<sup>44</sup> The Protevangelium of Santiago likewise states that Joseph brought Mary to a cave.<sup>45</sup> Justin Martyr and Origen both believed that Jesus was born in a cave, and Constantine built the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem over a group of caves.<sup>46</sup>

However, with the multiplicity of caves in the area of Bethlehem, how would the wise men have known which cave to choose? At this point, Iranian prophecy told them to look for shepherds worshipping the baby, since the Mithraic tradition shows shepherds witnessing the birth of Mithra.<sup>47</sup>

There is a claim that, for three reasons, the wise men did not come at the time of Jesus' birth, along with the shepherds, but significantly later.<sup>48</sup> However, not one of the reasons is convincing. First, it is pointed out that in Matthew 2:7, Herod grills the magi on when the star appeared. Then in Matthew 2:16, Herod has all the children in Bethlehem age two and younger put to death

according to the time when the star had appeared, as he had learned from the magi. It is argued that this statement shows that the wise men did not come to Palestine until almost two years after Jesus' birth. However, Herod, to be on the safe side, may have dated his calculations of the birth from the first alignment of the planets, which occurred seven months before the final merger. The magi's first awareness of the approach of the two planets might have thrown back Herod's calculation still earlier.<sup>40</sup> At any rate, Herod did not move immediately after the magi's visit to order the massacre, perhaps hesitating to take such drastic action. That he waited is clear from Luke 2:39, which shows that enough time passed before the blood-letting for Joseph and Mary to dedicate Jesus in the Temple and then to return to Nazareth, before the angel's warning to flee to Egypt. Since the period of time Herod waited is unknown, his calculations cannot be used to prove the timing of the magi's visit.

The second objection to placing the magi and the shepherds together is that in Matthew 2:10 Jesus is referred to by the Greek word *paidion* (child), rather than as a *brephos* (baby). It is argued that *paidion* would not be used of a child under two years of age. The Bible shows that this reasoning is flawed, for in Luke 1:59, the eight-day old John the Baptist is referred to as a *paidion*. The third objection is that in Matthew 2:11 the magi come into an *oikían* or house, showing that the magi were no longer in an area for animals and certainly not a cave. Yet *oikían* can denote any dwelling place.<sup>50</sup>

With so many shepherds in the Bethlehelem area, how could the magi be certain they had found the correct assembly of shepherds around a new-born baby? The next evidence the magi were alerted to seek by their Iranian prophecies was the virgin mother. Jews also looked to the *Tanach* as foretelling the coming of a man to be born of a virgin who would overcome Satan and reclaim the leadership of humankind. However, the references involved are of the type that seem less opaque in hindsight. In Genesis 3:15, God tells Adam that the sperm of a woman (i.e. presumably a product of virgin birth) would bruise Satan's head. In Isaiah 9:6, the suffering servant to come is prophesied to be both God and a man born as a child. And Isaiah 7:14 says that as a sign a boy will be born of a virgin. The Hebrew word used in the Masoretic text, *alma* (rather than *betulah*, specifically a virgin), can mean either a "virgin" or merely a "young woman," but if it cannot be given the former meaning then it would not seem to be a special sign. It is thus the context, not the word alone, that indicates that a virgin is meant. In the Septuagint, the word used is *parthénos*, meaning specifically a virgin. Yet the passage is still problematic, because it can be read to refer to Isaiah's son to be born of the prophetess as a sign that Syria and Israel — Judah's two enemies at the time — will soon disappear as threats. Since the boy's mother conceived after Isaiah went to her, this shows fairly clearly that she, at least, was not a virgin mother. Isaiah 7:14 says that the mother will name the boy soon to be born (Immanuel), while Isaiah 8:3 states that the father (Isaiah) will name his

own son, indicating either that Isaiah's son was expected to be God or, it is argued, that there were two levels of fulfilment of the one prophecy. The New Testament claim of Mary's virgin birth applied this Hebrew prophecy to the suffering servant (and thus to the Messiah). As one Bible scholar, Edward Young, has commented of this tangle, the "language of prophecy is filled with mystery and is sometimes obscure."<sup>51</sup>

The Iranians prophesied that the Savior (Mithra) was to be born as a human baby to the virgin Anahita. Incidentally, the central importance of the virgin birth was emphasized by its inclusion in still another non-Hebraic prophecy — the Sybilline Prophecies of Rome. The magi would not have been sure of the mother's virginity, but they certainly could have told if she were patently not a virgin (if she had previous children).

To pinpoint the correct child even more, the magi could look to Daniel 9:25, which states that the Messiah will be a prince, that is born of royal blood. This assurance would have been reinforced by the symbolism of Jupiter's role, standing for royalty, in the planet alignment, as explained above. Other Hebrew prophecy was also explicit on this subject. Isaiah 9:6–7 says that the coming Prince of Peace will be heir to the throne of David. Isaiah 11:1 says that this prince will be born of the stock of Jesse, the father of David and ancestor of the royal Jewish dynasty. Matthew 1:1 speaks of Jesus as descended from David.

It might be asked if Joseph and Mary, poor as they were, could have boasted royal blood. The credibility of this claim is seen in the life of Rabbi Hillel, a first century B.C. descendent of David who at one point earned money by chopping wood and who was so poor that he could not afford the entrance fee to a *yeshiva* and almost froze to death while trying to listen to the class from the roof. It might also be questioned whether paranoid King Herod the Great would have tolerated the presence of descendents of the old legitimate royal line in his kingdom. Actually, descendents of the Davidic line are known to have kept their genealogy and to have survived as private citizens through even Herod's reign. In the new form of Jewish government introduced under the Romans in 70 A.D. and lasting until 425 A.D., the Palestinian Jews would be ruled by Patriarchs who claimed descent from Hillel and hence from David. The Romans granted these Patriarchs the official status and title of *Nasi* ("Prince").<sup>52</sup> One of their line, Rabbi Judah Ha-nasi, a leader in compiling the *Mishnah* around 200 A.D., worked at Sepphoris, a town within sight of Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary raised Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

A final possible clue for the magi was the Iranian prophecy that the Savior God would be born on the twenty-fifth of December (the Middle Eastern dating system starting a new day at sundown, or on our Christmas Eve).<sup>54</sup> One objection to the twenty-fifth of December dating is that it would purportedly have been too cold to herd sheep at night in Bethlehem.<sup>55</sup> Yet according to residents, this practice is occasionally followed in Bethlehem still today, in a warm

winter.<sup>56</sup>

Another objection is that it has also been calculated that Jesus was born at the end of September. This dating is based on Luke's account of Zachariah being told, while serving in the Temple, that his aged wife Elizabeth will bear a child. Zachariah was a priest who served in the Temple in the course of Abia. This term means that he served twice a year, on the 12–18 of Chisleu (or 6–12 December) and on the 12–18 of Sivan (the 13–19 June). Luke 1:24 says that after the days of his ministration, his wife conceived John the Baptist. If she conceived immediately, that means that she was six months pregnant in late June or late December, when Mary was told she would conceive Jesus. If Mary also conceived at once, that means that Mary would have given birth to Jesus in late March or late September.<sup>57</sup> The problem with these calculations is that the Bible does not say that either Elizabeth or Mary conceived immediately after the angels announced the coming births. It seems rash, in the light of the long period of time that followed God's promise of a son to Abraham before its realization, to conclude that they did.

December twenty-fifth as the date for Christmas is first mentioned from 354 A.D.<sup>58</sup> Although we know little about the date of celebration of Jesus' birth in the Roman West before that time, it is argued that 25 December was first chosen then in order to win over the followers of two religious groups, both of which honored this date. The first group was none other than the Mithraites, who by then were common in the Roman Empire.<sup>59</sup> The second group consisted of the Roman worshippers of Saturn, who celebrated their holiday, the Saturnalia, for three to seven days starting on 17 December.<sup>60</sup> Saturn was the ruler of the original Golden Age to be restored by the birth of a God to a virgin, as spelled out in the Sibylline Prophecies of Apollo.<sup>61</sup> Saturn had for centuries been equated with the Hebrew God Jehovah in Roman tradition.<sup>62</sup> Gift-giving, feasting, and the temporary freedom and equality of slaves were included in this celebration.<sup>63</sup>

Yet it can be argued that the two prophecies of Mithra and of Saturn did indeed point to Jesus. Why could it not be that the Savior God of light awaited by the Mithraites and the Saturnalians was Jesus, who was indeed born on the twenty-fifth of December? The claim to be Mithra made by one Persian in the third century B.C. and by another (Mani, founder of the Gnostic Manicheans) in the third century A.D. has no more bearing on whether the prophecy points to Jesus than do the self-declarations of other Jews to be the Messiah.

The universal connection between the winter solstice and the advent of the savior god of light is, in C. S. Lewis' opinion, a foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus for these early peoples.<sup>64</sup> In Malachi 1:11, in the Septuagint, God says, "From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same my name has been glorified among the gentiles and in every place incense is offered unto my name." Although biblical prophecy is often expressed in the past tense, the context of this passage seems to set it in the period of its writing rather than in the future. In

Romans 1:20, Paul writes, "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead."

The link between the winter solstice and the birth of the Savior might be reviewed briefly across several cultures. Beside the sun imagery connected to the Iranian Mithra and to the Graeco-Roman Apollo of the Sibylline prophecies, and the Old and New Testament references to both Jehovah and Jesus as the light of the world, early Germanic and Celtic religions offer similar imagery.

The Greeks equated Apollo as a sun god with Mithra as well as with Ammon-Re and Aten.<sup>65</sup> Phoebus ("Shining") Apollo (from *Apoloúon* or "purifier" according to Plato)<sup>66</sup> stood for absolute Truth and was the beneficent healer and the intermediary between man and God who killed the great serpent.<sup>67</sup> The Greek sun worship is mentioned in the Septuagint's Genesis 43:23, which calls Jehovah Helios, another Greek name for the sun god. In Acts 17, Paul, when arguing the cause of Christianity before the Athenians on the Areopagus Hill, told them that their nearby altar "To an unknown God" referred to Jehovah. Plato's *Laws* and Diogenes Laertius *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* tell us that in 500 B.C., when a plague was raging in Athens, the town sent to Delphi to ask Apollo what they should do. Apollo answered that a god was offended by the sin of Athens, and that the Athenians should send to Crete to ask the philosopher Epimenides how to appease the god's wrath. Following Epimenides' instructions, the Athenians put a flock of hungry sheep out to graze on the Areopagos, and whatever sheep lay down instead of grazing was sacrificed on a new altar on the spot to the unnamed god. This procedure brought the plague to an end.<sup>68</sup> Paul not only proclaimed that the altar was to Jehovah, but he called Epimenides a prophet and quoted Epimenides' verse in his letter to Titus (Titus 1:12-13).

The Scandinavian Frey, forerunner of Santa Claus, was another god of light bringing good news at the mid-winter solstice.<sup>69</sup> The Germanic Wotan, after hanging on a tree and being killed and stabbed in the side with a spear, was to resurrect.<sup>70</sup> The Celtic sky god Lugh was likewise to die on a tree and then resurrect.<sup>71</sup>

It might also be noted that Hannukah (the Feast of Lights), which was superimposed in the Makabbean period over the old mid-winter solstice festival,<sup>72</sup> commemorates how a sign of divine protection for the Jews had been given in the form of a light burning supernaturally for eight days. Zola Levitt argues that the Feasts of Israel point to the major events of the first and second comings of Christ.<sup>73</sup> By this reasoning, this miracle, too, might have foreshadowed the day on which Yeshua as the light of the world (Matthew 5:14) would be born.

One last aspect of the Bible's nativity story which is often thrown into question is the requirement of returning to one's home town for tax census purposes, the law which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Without this element, Jesus would not have fulfilled Micah's prophecy (Micah 5:2) of being



born in Bethlehem. The use of such a system has been questioned on the grounds that it would have introduced a chaotic travel situation crowding the roads and imposing an unreasonable burden on the residents. Therefore, some claim that the story must have been added later. However, such doubts can be dismissed, because the same system is not only possible, it is still being applied in twentieth-century Lebanon.<sup>74</sup>

In summary, the very elements that from a strictly Hebrew or even Roman Empire cultural perspective make the nativity story so incredible—the wise men, the new star, the shepherds, the feeding trough, and the virgin birth—seen from the Persian tradition no longer seem unconnected, arbitrary choices. Instead, they interlock to form one integrated framework, each one a necessary element of a complete jigsaw puzzle. The magi, with their astronomical learning, study the stars in the generation predicted by Daniel for the Messiah's birth. The special star leads them by its symbolism and direction to Palestine. There, Hebrew prophecy tells them to look for the baby in Bethlehem. Once in Bethlehem, and on the prophesied night of December twenty-fifth, they can be certain that they have found the Messiah by looking for the cave (with its feeding trough used as a cradle for a new-born baby from a royal line), the adoring shepherds, and the virgin mother. Thus the Bible's nativity story, which has struck some observers as being contrived, takes on new meaning when viewed in the light of a cross-cultural study of Palestine and Persia.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:3.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Men of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 220; and W. M. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), pp. 13–17.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> William Stuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles* (New York: Tyndale House Publishers, 1973), p. 175.



<sup>6</sup>Lockyer, p. 220.

<sup>7</sup>Hugh J. Schofield, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>McDowell, pp. 309–312.

<sup>9</sup>Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Vol. II* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, 1990), pp. 192–193.

<sup>10</sup>Brown, p. 167; Asimov, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup>Brown, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup>Roger David Aus, "The Magi at the Birth of Cyrus and the Magi at Jesus' Birth in Matthew 2: 1–12," in *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 109–110.

<sup>13</sup>Brown, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Richardson, Texas: Probe Books, 1992), p. 146; Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their Beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), p. 540; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* (London: Chatto and Windus, Ltd., 1963), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup>Nash, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup>Vermaseren, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup>Durant, pp. 524 and 540; Nash, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup>Vermaseren, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup>Durant, p. 654.

<sup>20</sup>J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 45.

<sup>21</sup>Macdowell, Vol. I, pp. 170–175.

<sup>22</sup>E. W. Maunder, *The Astronomy of the Bible* (London: T. Sealey Clark and Company, 1908), pp. 394–398.

<sup>23</sup>Brown, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), pp. 81–82.

<sup>25</sup>Brown, pp. 171–172.

<sup>26</sup>Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. by Benjamin Jowett (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), pp. 586–588.

<sup>27</sup>Plato, p. 452.

<sup>28</sup>Maunder, pp. 394–398.

<sup>29</sup>Werner Keller, *Und die Bibel hat doch Recht* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1964), pp. 292–294; Brown, pp. 172–173.

<sup>30</sup>Keller, pp. 291–292.

<sup>31</sup>Keller, p. 294.

<sup>32</sup>W. M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), pp. 225–229.

<sup>33</sup>Keller, p. 294.

<sup>34</sup>Clemens Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospels* (Freiberg, Germany: Herder, 1963), p. 1.

<sup>35</sup>Yahya Armajani, *Iran* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice–Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 43.

<sup>36</sup>W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 281.

<sup>37</sup>Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1958), pp. 152–155.

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<sup>40</sup> Jung, pp. 146–147.

<sup>41</sup> C. Kerenyi, C., *Eleusis* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1962), p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, p. 399.

<sup>43</sup> William M. Thompson, *The Land and the Book, Vol. I* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882), p. 35. Brown p. 401.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, p. 401.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, p. 401.

<sup>46</sup> Brown, p. 401.

<sup>47</sup> Vermaseren, pp. 72 and 77; Brown, p. 420.

<sup>48</sup> C. E. McLain, *The True Birthdate of Jesus: Its Prophetic Significance* (Oklahoma City: Southwest Radio Church, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> Maunder, pp. 394–398.

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<sup>52</sup> Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God and History* (New York: Signet Books of The New American Library, 1962), pp. 173–174.

<sup>53</sup> William Hughes (Ed.), *Western Civilization, Vol. 1* (Sluice Dock, Guilford, Connecticut: The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., 1995), p. 87; and Richard A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), throughout.

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<sup>55</sup> Keller, p. 295.

<sup>56</sup> Personal queries of residents of Bethlehem (July 1991).

<sup>57</sup> McLain, pp. 5–9.

<sup>58</sup> Keller, p. 295.

<sup>59</sup> Durant, p. 524.

<sup>60</sup> Van L. Johnson, *The Roman Origins of Our Calendar* (Medford, Massachusetts: American Classical League, 1974), pp. 71–72; and Asimov, p. 270.

<sup>61</sup> Durant, p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Strauss and Girovic, 1979), p. 118.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, p. 72.

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<sup>66</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, p. 96.

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<sup>68</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1981), pp. 9–25.

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<sup>70</sup> *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (Paris: Prometheus Press, 1959), p. 257.

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