Astronomical Calculations for

The Real Star of Bethlehem

While the spectacular astronomical signs in the 18 months from May 3 B.C. to December 2 B.C. would have caused wonderful interpretations by astrologers on behalf of Augustus and the Roman Empire, the Magi decided to go to Jerusalem with gifts to a newborn Jewish king. The Magi focused on Judaea and not Rome at this crucial time in history.

Let us look at some of the astrological and biblical factors that may have brought the Magi to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. Since the New Testament says the Magi saw the “star” rising in the east, it would most naturally be called a “morning star.” The Book of Revelation has Jesus saying of himself, “I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.” ¹ The apostle Peter also mentioned that Jesus was symbolically associated with “the day star.” ²

The above verses refer to celestial bodies that were well known and recognized in the 1st century and they inspired symbolic messianic interpretation by early Christians. There were several prophecies in Isaiah which generally were interpreted as referring to the Messiah. One has definite astronomical overtones to it. Isaiah said, “The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.” ³ This prophecy could easily refer to the rising of some star. It would be particularly appropriate to a “morning” or “day” star. Luke, in his Gospel, referring to the celestial symbolism of Isaiah 60:3 which spoke of God as being “the daybreak [the rising] from on high that hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness.” ⁴

Astronomy and the New Testament

These references reveal that celestial bodies were symbolically important to the New Testament writers. We know that the generality of the world was then engrossed with such symbolic concepts. The rising of a star or planet just before sunrise was particularly significant in interpreting events relating to important people. And Luke in his Gospel refers to Jesus as a star which will bring great light to all the world.

With this in mind, let us recall from our first chapter that on morning of August 12, 3 B.C. (about an hour and twenty minutes before sunrise), Jupiter rose as a morning star in conjunction with Venus. How would astrologers or Magi have interpreted this union? Let us took at some of the generally accepted beliefs of astrologers who lived in the time of Augustus and Herod.

Jupiter was known astrologically as the Father of the Gods. The planet Jupiter symbolized this deity. And in early August 2 B.C. Jupiter had just left its vicinity near the Sun and conjoined with Venus. This could have been an indication of a coming birth. “Jupiter often was associated with the birth of kings and therefore called the King planet.” ⁵ And here was the King planet in conjunction with Venus. To the Chaldeans and the Magi, Venus was Ishtar, the Mother, the Goddess of Fertility. Thus
Jupiter (the Father) was now in conjunction with Venus (the Mother). Could this have signified to astrologers that the birth of a new king was imminent?

This conjunction could have been a favorable sign because these two planets were known by astrologers as the Greater and the Lesser Good Fortunes of all the planets. And note this: while this conjunction was occurring, the Sun (the Supreme Father), the Moon (considered a Mother), and Mercury (the Messenger of the Gods) were located in the single constellation of Leo, the Lion. Christians called Jesus “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.” These primary bodies clustering in Leo while Jupiter and Venus were now in close union may reflect biblical significance. Note Olcott’s remarks about the sign of Leo,

“The Lion was the symbol of the Tribe of Judah, and the constellation appears in the Hebrew zodiac. ... The association of Leo with Judah arose from the fact that Leo was Judah’s natal sign. In the Bible there are frequent allusions to this connection between Leo and the tribe of Judah. Thus we read: ‘Judah is the Lion’s whelp,’ and again, ‘The Lion of the tribe of Judah.’”

The interesting astral relationships which occurred in the pre-dawn of August 12, 3 B.C. could well have signified to astrologers that some important royal event was soon to happen in the Jewish nation.

**Grand Astronomical Displays**

Another interesting celestial occasion occurred in the heavens twenty days later. Mercury (the Messenger of the Gods) left its position with the Sun (the Supreme Father) and positioned itself in close conjunction with Venus. This took place when the Sun had just entered the constellation of Virgo (the Virgin). Mercury (the Messenger) and Venus were then in the constellation of Leo (the Lion) and Jupiter (the King planet) was just then entering Leo. All these astral signs echo clear biblical themes. God was called “the Sun of righteousness” in Malachi 4:2, and in the New Testament he is called God the Father. Christians believed that God’s son was to be born of a virgin, to be a descendent of Judah (Leo, the Lion), and destined to be introduced by a Messenger (John the Baptist).

“As it is written in the prophets, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.’”

Were these celestial relationships a signal to the Magi that some royal birth was soon to occur among the Jews? This was not all that happened in the year 3/2 B.C. Following these initial planetary conjunctions, Jupiter then moved on (as we have shown in chapter one) to unite with the star Regulus on September 14, 3 B.C. Indeed, it joined with Regulus on three different occasions within that astronomical year.

**Signaling the Birth of a King**
These three unions could have been of great consequence to astrologers. Regulus was known as “the King.” The Romans referred to it as “Rex,” which means “King” in Latin. In Arabia the star was known as the “Kingly One.” The Greeks called it the “King Star.” Of all the stars in the heavens, Regulus was universally associated by the ancient astrologers with the attributes of greatness and power. It is located practically on the ecliptic (the path which the Sun takes in traversing the heavens). It was thought that this position made it of special importance to the Sun. According to astrologers the Sun ruled the heavens. Thus, the major star closest to the ecliptic of the “ruling” Sun was Regulus. This close relationship to the Sun made Regulus a “royal star,” the one most associated with the conception or birth of kings. It was the star denoting rulership.

With this in mind, we should recall the prophecy of Balaam recorded by Moses. He spoke about a “star” to rise in Israel that would be connected with rulership or dominion. “A star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre [ruling rod] shall rise out of Israel.” 9 The arrangement of the verses in the prophecy shows that the “star” is connected with a “sceptre.” This suggests that the “star” would symbolically represent “dominion.” This is made clear in the following verse of the prophecy. “Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion.” 10 This is why the “sceptre” is associated with the “star.” It was the tribe of Judah (Leo, the Lion) that was prophesied to possess this sceptre in Israel. “Judah is a lion’s whelp ... he couched as a lion ... the sceptre shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh come.” 11 Since the Bible talks of the “star,” a “sceptre,” and Judah (the Lion, Leo), the only star in the heavens that fits this combination of factors mentioned by Balaam is the star Regulus (the King star).

### The Use of Biblical Astronomy in Prophetic Themes

In biblical symbolism, Regulus is the Star of the Messiah. It is located directly between the feet of the Lion in the constellation of Leo. Moses even prophesied that Judah (the Lion) would have a “lawgiver from [ruling staff] between his feet until Shiloh come.” 12 Alfred Jeremias back in 1911 showed that this prophecy referred to the star Regulus (the star of rulership). 13 This was also shown by Roger W. Sinnott in his article in *Sky and Telescope*. 14

There can hardly be a doubt that this determination of Sinnott and Jeremias is correct. It has always been known that the major star Regulus, which was situated practically on the ecliptic of the Sun, was between the Lion’s paws. Indeed, Regulus was (and still is) positioned precisely where the prophecy placed it: “between the feet” of Leo (the Lion). Note the following diagram.
Leo was the constellation assigned to Judah. When it is realized that Regulus was recognized by the early Jews as the Star of the Messiah, we can then symbolically apply some significant astronomical occurrences in the year 3 to 2 B.C. that involved Regulus and the planet Jupiter.

**The King Planet and the King Star**

Let us now look at the interesting heavenly relationships that developed between Jupiter (the King planet) and Regulus (the King star) in the year 3/2 B.C. There were three conjunctions in which both heavenly bodies seemed to be centering on each other (over an eight month period). It was as if Jupiter were homing in on Regulus, using it as an axis and directing earthly attention to it. This could have easily signified to astrologers that some royal event was to occur. While the Magi must have considered all three as having real importance, note especially the first of the three conjunctions of Jupiter and Regulus on September 14, 3 B.C.

Here was Jupiter (the King planet), which had just united with Venus (the Mother) on August 12, 3 B.C., now joining itself with the King star Regulus (the star of the Jewish Messiah) in the zodiacal sign of Leo (the constellation of Judah), while the Sun (the Supreme Father or Ruler) was then located in Virgo (the Virgin). All of these features are reminiscent of biblical themes associated with the birth and personage of the Jewish Messiah. Recall that the Messiah was prophesied to be born of a virgin and to be the king of Judah. King Herod must have wondered about this initial display of Jupiter with Regulus.

Then note what happened. The second conjunction of Jupiter and Regulus occurred on February 17, 2 B.C. Amazingly, the Moon came to be positioned at that exact time between Jupiter and Regulus. At about 5 a.m., looking at the western horizon, an observer would have seen the Moon directly between Jupiter and Regulus. The Moon would have been occulting (covering up) the star Regulus with the lower fifth of the Moon’s diameter. Then, on May 8/9, 2 B.C. (82 days later) the same conjunction occurred again. This time, however, the Moon occulted Regulus by the top one fifth of its
diameter. The last conjunction would not have been seen in Palestine since the Moon was already below the horizon in the west, yet astronomers such as the Magi would have known what was happening.

These three conjunctions of Jupiter with Regulus would have shown Jupiter making a type of “crowning effect” over the star Regulus. It was like the King planet was placing a “crown” (like a circular diadem) over the King star (the Star of the Messiah). And importantly, all of this occurred within the constellation of Leo (the Lion), the zodiacal sign of Judah.

More Spectacular Signs

These were not all the signs of 3/2 B.C. After the planet’s three separate conjunctions with Regulus, Jupiter then continued its westward journey (as observers would have viewed it on earth). On June 17, 2 B.C. it had its spectacularly rare reunion with Venus which we mentioned in the first chapter. The two planets were then a mere .01 degree from one another and they would have appeared to people on earth like a single “double-star” which only the sharpest eyes would have been able to separate. Let us see what this may have meant to the Magi.

Venus (now in its double role as a Mother because the planet was now an evening star) had just extended itself as far east as possible to encounter Jupiter (the King planet) which was moving west in a direct path to meet her. What occurred was a splendid planetary conjunction visible west of Babylon. Besides that, this beautiful conjunction again happened while the planets were in the constellation of Leo (Judah) and at the exact time of the Full Moon. So close were the two planets that they would have appeared very much like one gigantic star in a “marriage union” with each other.

Furthermore, the Magi (who would have been in Mesopotamia) would have witnessed this planetary union appearing on the western horizon precisely in the direction of Judaea. This celestial occurrence prompted Isaac Asimov to ask the question, “Is the fact that the unusual ‘star’ was seen in the direction of Judaea enough to make them think of a Messiah?”

This heavenly scene could well have produced an interest in the Magi to look toward Jerusalem and not to the celebrations in Rome for the arrival of the messianic king of the world. It could have been interpreted that these two planets, which introduced the prophesied king in their symbolic way when they were both morning stars some ten months before, were now completing their introduction with an impressively rare evening star union.

What a beautiful display this last rendezvous would have made in the early evening sky west of Babylon. But about an hour later, the planets would have appeared even closer to observers in Palestine. There had been nothing like this brilliant conjunction for centuries nor would there be again for many generations. While the earlier conjunction of Jupiter and Venus on August 12, 3 B.C. occurred in the closing degrees of the constellation of Cancer, this reunion some ten months later took place just beyond the
zero line for astrological reckoning in the constellation of Leo the Lion. It could well have symbolized to the Magi the closing of one era, and the beginning of another.

**The Impressive Signs of 3/2 B.C.E.**

The astronomical displays were not over for that significant year. On August 27, 2 B.C. (72 days after the spectacular Jupiter/Venus reunion), there occurred the extremely close conjunction of Jupiter with Mars (the planet of war), while Venus and Mercury homed in on them in an unusual massing of four planets. Jupiter was located at 142.6 degrees, Mars 142.64, Venus 141.67 and Mercury 143.71. Such closeness in the pre-dawn skies would have given astrologers much to talk about, especially when the other events of the year were connected with it.

Look at this massing of the planets. All the primary planets (except Saturn) were now clustering near one another in the constellation of Leo (Judah), while the Moon was just then entering Leo. The Sun, however, at that very time was entering the sign of Virgo (the Virgin). These indications once again could show remarkable prophetic themes mentioned in the Bible that people were looking for at the time.

What might this massing of the planets have meant to the Magi? Since Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Mercury had just become new morning stars, it could well have signified that war (Mars was involved) would break out on the earth just before the dawning of the new day which the planetary signs were supposedly introducing. The world was then looking for a new Golden Age to emerge. The messianic teachings of the Old Testament showed that the new age would be introduced by a war to end all wars. Perhaps astrologers interpreted that it was the king of the tribe of Judah who would bring in the new age. The Roman poet Virgil, a few years before in his Fourth Eclogue, had given a prophetic teaching that such a Golden Age was destined to come to earth.

One thing is certain. The year 3/2 B.C. was replete with visible astronomical events. Since Genesis 1:14 says that the heavenly bodies were accounted for signs, perhaps these unusual relationships were interpreted by the Magi as indicating the birth of the Jewish Messiah into the world.

**The Outcome of these Astronomical Signs**

Let us now look at some interesting biblical teaching which could suggest that what I am saying is true. It has long been recognized that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem some time after Jesus was born. He had already been circumcised and presented in the temple forty days after birth. When the Magi arrived the parents of Jesus were then living in a house, not a stable. Jesus was also being called a paidion [ordinarily, child or toddler], not a brephos [infant]. One cannot press the meaning of these two terms too far, but there were ordinary differences between them that most contexts would acknowledge as showing distinction. After the Magi presented their gifts, they returned home by a different route. In response to this subterfuge, Herod slew the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years of age and younger.
Since it was often difficult for astrologers to interpret whether heavenly signs were indicating events associated with conception or birth, Herod no doubt maneuvered his strategy against the newborn child by taking both possibilities into account. He killed the children up to two years of age so he could include those both conceived and born within that period. Whatever the case, all these indications show that the Magi must have arrived in Bethlehem to present their gifts several months after the birth of Jesus.

This leads us to the final suggestion that could help us identify the “Star of Bethlehem.” The stellar body that played the most prominent role in the extraordinary year of 3/2 B.C. and the planet which figured in almost every celestial relationship was Jupiter. It could well be that Jupiter was “his star” that the Magi followed to Jerusalem, and finally to Bethlehem.

**The Proper Star of Bethlehem**

Let us observe some factors that could go a long way in showing this. Recall that the account in the New Testament said the Magian astrologers saw the star *rising* above the eastern horizon. And in August 12, 3 B.C., Jupiter rose as a morning star which soon came into conjunction with Venus. That started Jupiter off on a journey in which six conjunctions with other planets and the star Regulus took place. The final planetary union was the massing of the planets which occurred with Mars, Venus and Mercury on August 27, 2 B.C.

But there was one more spectacular astronomical display that involved the planet Jupiter at the end of 2 B.C. The planet soon left its “massing” with the other three planets and continued in its apparent motion westward each morning as viewed by the Magi at their regular pre-dawn observations. If the Magi began their own journey toward Jerusalem near this time, this apparent westward motion of Jupiter each day could have indicated to the Magi to proceed in the same westward direction toward Jerusalem. They could have been “following” Jupiter in the example it was setting. The Bible says the star “went ahead of them.” The text could well mean that the Magi let Jupiter lead them in this symbolic fashion. I will give more on this in a moment.

Then note what took place. Upon reaching Jerusalem the Magi were told to look toward Bethlehem for the newborn king. This happened when the New Testament says the “star” came to a *definite* halt in the heavens. It stopped its motion of leading the Magi and “stood over where the young child was.” In a word, the celestial body became stationary.

Let us now note one point carefully. The text does NOT say the star stood over the house. Some have imagined that this is what Matthew meant. This assumption is totally unwarranted. Such presumption is reading into the text what is not there. What the New Testament states is that the star became stationary. But who ever heard of a star becoming stationary in the heavens?

**The Star Stood Still**
It is this description of the star standing still that has caused many interpreters to characterize the whole episode in Matthew as either fictitious or a miraculous event. Most people find it difficult to imagine a normal heavenly body having the capability of stopping its movement over a small village in Palestine. At first thought, a person might agree that such a thing appears impossible. But maybe the account is not as ridiculous as it may seem. In truth, there is not the slightest difficulty for such a thing to happen.

The truth is, Matthew was simply describing a celestial phenomenon in popular language that all astronomers and persons acquainted with basic planetary motions would have been fully aware. Planets do come to a “stop” at prescribed times in their heavenly motions. This happens at the time for a planet’s retrogression and progression. It may be that Matthew was simply showing that Jupiter had become stationary in its motions through the fixed stars at the time it reached its zenith over Bethlehem.

The theologian F. Steinmetzer, back in 1912, wrote an article stating his belief that Matthew was referring to one of these normal “stationary” positions of the planets. Indeed, Steinmetzer suggested that the planet that suited Matthew’s account the best was Jupiter. This is true.

**Jupiter Does Stop in the Heavens**

How is it that Jupiter can come to a stopped position in the heavens? Look at the diagram below. Jupiter becomes “stationary” at its times for retrogression and progression. When we look at Jupiter we see the planet normally moving eastward each evening through the fixed stars. This apparent movement is called “proper motion.” The earth, however, is moving in its orbit around the Sun faster than that of Jupiter. When the earth reaches point A, an observer would see Jupiter nearly along the same line as the earth’s own orbital movement. When the earth is traveling more or less in a direct line toward Jupiter, the planet will continue to show “proper motion.” But when earth reaches position B, it is no longer heading toward Jupiter. The faster velocity of the earth as it makes its turn to B and beyond, causes the apparent motion of Jupiter to slow down. This continues until the earth reaches C. At that point the speed of the earth in relation to Jupiter is the same as Jupiter’s. That is when Jupiter appears to become stationary within the background of the fixed stars. As the earth progresses from C to D, it has greater relative speed than Jupiter and this causes Jupiter to retrogress. The planet reverses its motion and travels westward through the stars. At D, however, the speed of the earth and Jupiter are again matched (relative to each other) and Jupiter stops its reverse motion. When D is passed, Jupiter returns to “proper motion.” This is what happened when Jupiter came in contact with the star Regulus on three different occasions in the late part of 3 B.C. and the early part of 2 B.C. The diagram below shows how this occurs.
Let us now look at what happened at the end of 2 B.C. Jupiter arrived at its ordinary time for retrogression and it became stationary among the stars. But this time something unusual happened. In 2 B.C. as viewed from Jerusalem, Jupiter came to its normal stationary position directly over Bethlehem on December 25th. That’s right! Just before dawn (the regular time the Magi would have begun their normal observations of the heavens), Jupiter came to a “stopped” position on December 25th directly over Bethlehem as witnessed from Jerusalem. Not only that, the planet assumed its stationary position while in the middle of the constellation of Virgo, the Virgin. What a remarkable circumstance this was.

**Jupiter Stopped Within the Sign of Virgo the Virgin**

We are told in the New Testament that Jesus was born of a virgin. And precisely on December 25, 2 B.C., Jupiter “stopped” in the abdomen region of Virgo, the Virgin (in the middle of the constellation). This position was right where a woman carries a child in pregnancy. On that day the “King, planet” stopped its lateral motion through the stars and remained stationary for about six days. During those days it did not move longitudinally more than one fortieth of the Moon’s diameter from its December 25th position. To an observer on earth it appeared completely stationary in the midst of Virgo. This would have appeared significant to astrologers. They looked on the Winter Solstice period as the beginning of the new Sun. This period signified to many Gentile astrologers as the time for showing the birth of the Sun. It was celebrated in most areas of the world as the nativity of the “Ruler” of the heavens. And the “King planet” (Jupiter) was now stationary in the central region of Virgo, the Virgin.

Be this as it may, how was it possible for Jupiter to be stationary over the village of Bethlehem at that time? There is not the slightest problem for it to do so. The Bible says the Magi saw the star come to a stop while they were in Jerusalem. And on December
25, 2 B.C.E., at the ordinary time for the Magi’s pre-dawn observations, Jupiter would have been seen in meridian position (directly over Bethlehem) at an elevation of 68 degrees above the southern horizon. This precise position would show the planet shining directly down on Bethlehem while it was stationary among the stars. What a remarkable coincidence this was. And though this period has nothing to do with the actual birth of Jesus, as we will show later in this book, it may have been the time when the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus. This could be a reason why people in the later Christian Church said that December 25 was a day associated with the Magi presenting their costly and royal gifts to the newborn Jesus.

The Star Led the Magi to Jesus

While all this is true, there is nevertheless a problem to reckon with. Matthew said the star “went before them.” Since the Magi were then in Jerusalem when this was stated, and because Bethlehem is located five miles south, how could Jupiter (or any planet or star) appear to move from north to south leading the Magi to Bethlehem? Does this mean that the whole story must be reckoned as fictitious or miraculous after all? Not really. A careful reading of Matthew may make the matter clear. Weymouth translates the passage, “The star they had seen when it rose led them on until it reached and stood over the place where the babe was” (Matthew 2:9, emphasis mine).

This verse has interesting and revealing information in it when read closely. It helps to show that the Magi had been following the star from the time it rose which they saw at their homes in the east, and they continued to follow it until they reached Jerusalem. The church father Chrysostom also understood Matthew in the same way.

“For on their way as far as Palestine it [the star] appeared leading them, but after they set foot within Jerusalem, it hid itself: then again, when they left Herod, having told him on what account they came, and were on the point of departing, it showed itself again.”

There are other indications in the text of Matthew which show this may be the intended meaning. One should look very carefully at the text because it has some interesting points associated with it. In regard to this, the authors of The Expositor’s Greek Testament ask the question:

“Is the meaning that they had seen the star only at its rising, finding their way to Jerusalem without its guidance, and that again it appeared leading them to Bethlehem? Against this is verse 7, which implies continuous visibility. ... It was their celestial guide appearing again [after they left Herod]: it kept going before them [imperfect] all the way till, arriving at Bethlehem, it took up its position right over the spot where the child was.”

The use of the imperfect tense in verse 9 shows that the star was constantly leading them, while verse 7 suggests it was a continually appearing star. The star seems temporarily to have been obscured while the Magi visited Herod at his palace (clouds
may have then covered it or it may have been below the horizon when they visited the king). Upon leaving the palace, however, they once again saw their celestial guide. It had led them westward to Jerusalem, but now it came to be in a meridian position over Bethlehem. It was stationary among the stars and shining down directly over Bethlehem as viewed from Jerusalem on December 25th. It was now pointing out the exact geographical location of the newborn king.

**Jupiter and the Solstice of 2 B.C.**

Interestingly, while Jupiter was in its “standing still” position over Bethlehem, the Sun was also “standing still.” All know that December 25 is in the usual period of the Winter Solstice. The word *"solstice"* means “Sun stands still.” These stationary coincidences of Jupiter and the Sun are quite related, and would surely have appeared significant to astrologers at the time. Cumont has the following evaluation,

“General observance required that on the 25th of December the birth of the ‘new Sun’ should be celebrated, when after the winter solstice, the days began to lengthen and the invincible star triumphed again over darkness.”

Recall that even Luke said at the beginning of his Gospel that “*the dayspring from on high has visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness.*” The Magi, being astrologers, would no doubt have wanted to give gifts to the “newborn Sun,” and in the book of Malachi the God of Israel is called “the Sun of Righteousness.” They would have supposed that the child in their midst was the one destined to usher in the new Golden Age that most were then expecting.

Professor Eliade, whom many consider to have been the foremost authority on the past and present religious customs of peoples has shown that the ancients looked on the dawning of each New Year (the Solstice period) as symbolic of the inauguration of a new age. The Magi would have been aware of these well-known beliefs. Here they were, after making their long journey with expensive gifts to give to the newborn king, now discovering from their point of view that the Sun (the Supreme Father) was “standing still” in the heavens while Jupiter (the King planet) was also “standing still.” These features could perfectly fit Matthew’s account.

**The Interpretation of the Magi**

Thus, the Magi being Gentiles would have approached this astronomical relationship from their own religious point of view. Almost all non-Jewish societies placed great emphasis on the occasion of the re-birth of the “Sun God” at each Winter Solstice and they had many religious celebrations to accompany it. Jews, however, would not have viewed this season of the year in that fashion. Most Jews at the time abhorred these Gentile religious festivals at the Winter Solstice or any other seasons of the year. They could point to the prophet Jeremiah who commanded the Jews never to adhere to Gentile religious customs involving the various solstice or equinox seasons of the year. The Jews considered these to be Gentile practices.
The Jews in Jerusalem would have looked on these astronomical signs in 3/2 B.C. very differently. In fact, December 25th in 2 B.C. was not a time of solstice celebrations to the Jews. Remarkably, however, it was a period for great festivity throughout the whole of the Jewish nation. It happened to be the precise time for their feast of Hanukkah (sometimes spelled Chanukkah). This was a feast of the Jews held near the beginning of winter and it is mentioned in the New Testament as “the Feast of Dedication.” The start of the eight days celebration can sometimes occur as early as November 28th or as late as December 27th on our solar calendar. The Jewish months can vary at times as much as a month out of phase with the solar calendar that we use today. But in the year 2 B.C., it is evident that Hanukkah began on December 23rd. The Magi would have given their gifts to the newborn babe on the third day of the Jewish festival. This would have been an interesting and symbolic time to present their gifts to the one they considered to be the messianic king that the Jewish nation was then expecting to appear. This was because Hanukkah was a time for gift giving.

The Magi and the Jewish Feast of Hanukkah

This feast of Hanukkah was not ordained in the Old Testament but all Jews held it in high esteem. It took on a secular and religious importance that was second only to the Passover season. It commemorated the time in 164 B.C. when the temple had been cleansed of Gentile idols placed there by Antiochus Epiphanes. The temple had been desolate of its holiness for three years, but in the Jewish month of Kislev, on the 25th day of the month, the Maccabees once again established the temple services. That particular day and the seven days that followed were reckoned as days of celebration for the Jewish triumph over what they considered to be paganism and heathen idolatry. The Jewish symbolism associated with these days is the very antithesis of what the Gentile nations were emphasizing at their Winter Solstice celebrations, which probably included the symbolic beliefs that the Magi themselves adhered to in their role as priests.

Hanukkah was considered a festival of Dedication (or rather, of Re-dedication) of the temple and Jewish people to the God of Abraham and Moses. For this reason it became known as a “festival of renewal.” From the middle of the 2nd century B.C. onward, the Jews regularly assembled each year at that time in the temple or their synagogues. They carried branches of trees and palms in their hands, singing psalms to God for the great salvation which they considered they had been given. They looked on Hanukkah as a second feast of Tabernacles which symbolized the redemption of the Jews and the entire world to God. No fast or mourning because of any calamity or bereavement was permitted to be initiated during those eight days. It was a time of festivity and celebration. The temple, synagogues and all houses in the nation were lighted both within and without by many lamps and torches during the whole period. Josephus, for this reason, called the festival “the Feast of Lamps.”

The Whole Jewish Nation Was in Celebration

The Magi would then have witnessed the entire Jewish nation in a holiday spirit. As though they were taking part in the celebrations, these eastern priests would have given their gifts to the young child [or toddler] in Bethlehem on the third day of this Jewish
festival. This was a time when the Jewish people were in a happy mood with the whole landscape around Jerusalem and Bethlehem being illuminated with an abundance of lights. Interestingly, it was this precise period when it was customary for the Jewish people to give gifts to their children. From the Jewish point of view, there would have been no better time for the Magi to present their gifts to a Jewish child than at this period of Hanukkah. This was the traditional time for “gift-giving.”

The Jews, however, would not have been honoring the season as devoted to the renewal of the Sun God. It would have been just the opposite for them. To the Jews it was their time to celebrate their triumph over the idolatry of the Gentiles and the renewal of their lives to the God of Abraham and Moses. It is interesting that a permanent removal of idolatry from the world was prophesied in the Old Testament to take place at the advent of the Messiah. The dedication of the Messiah to the world at the “Feast of Dedication” may well have seemed an appropriate time for such a messianic christening to the Jews in the 1st century.

There can be little doubt that the symbolic emphasis of the Jews regarding these astronomical and calendar matters in 3/2 B.C. would have been far different from those of the Magi who were Gentile priests. Though this is true, it must be understood that the Jews would have been impressed as were the Gentiles at what was happening in the heavens in that spectacular astronomical year. They were well aware of the positive statement in Genesis 1:14 about the legitimacy of heavenly signs. We now know by recent literary discoveries that the Jews in the 1st century were very concerned with interpretations involving the motions of the celestial bodies. It is certain that many Jews would have been looking for heavenly signs that would have introduced the Messiah that they were then expecting to appear on earth.

**The Magi Gave their Gifts at Hanukkah**

What we find in this unique calendar circumstance is that the Jews were seeing Jesus as the Messiah by having the Magi give their gifts in the midst of their celebration of Hanukkah, while the heathen peoples in the world were seeing the Magi represent them at the time of their Winter Solstice celebrations. It is interesting that these festival occasions occurred in combination to one another in that year. Jewish and pagan celebrations combined for that year.

Of course, the astrological interpretations made in this book may or may not be in conformity with those of the Magi. Only the Magi themselves could best answer what prompted them to go to Jerusalem. The Jews observing the Magi giving their gifts to the child at Bethlehem may have (or may not have) interpreted any symbolic associations in a messianic sense by the Magi’s action, even though the event happened in the midst of Hanukkah. Let us face it, none of us was there at the time to justify dogmatism on these matters. Astrological interpretation is a very subjective art and even astrologers today are not sure how the ancients viewed all the astronomical signs. Regardless of these uncertainties, the celestial phenomena of the year 3/2 B.C. did in fact take place.
## Major Conjunctions

### 3 and 2 B.C.E.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>Separation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 May 3 B.C.</td>
<td>22:47</td>
<td>Mercury-Saturn</td>
<td>0.67’ = 40’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 June 3 B.C.</td>
<td>16:06</td>
<td>Venus-Saturn</td>
<td>0.12’ = 7’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Aug 3 B.C.</td>
<td>5:20</td>
<td>Venus-Jupiter</td>
<td>0.07’ = 4.3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Aug 3 B.C.</td>
<td>21:03</td>
<td>Mercury-Venus</td>
<td>0.36’ = 22’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep. 3 B.C.</td>
<td>5:05</td>
<td>Jupiter-Regulus</td>
<td>0.33’ = 20’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Feb. 2 B.C.</td>
<td>15:15</td>
<td>Jupiter-Regulus</td>
<td>0.85’ = 51’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 May 2 B.C.</td>
<td>16:10</td>
<td>Jupiter-Regulus</td>
<td>0.72’ = 43’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 June 2 B.C.</td>
<td>17:53</td>
<td>Jupiter-Venus</td>
<td>0.01’ = 0.5’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Aug 2 B.C.</td>
<td>15:15</td>
<td>Mars-Jupiter</td>
<td>0.10’ = 7’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dates and times are expressed in Universal Time. Add 2h 58m to convert to Babylon local time. The northernmost planet is listed first. Angular separations are expressed in degrees and arcminutes (1 arcminute equals 1/60th of a degree). The resolving power of the human eye is about 3 arcminutes.

I calculated the conjunctions in this booklet using Bretagnon and Simon’s *Planetary Programs and Tables from -4000 to +2800* along with a program for Apple II computers (written by Peter Scott for the Griffith Observatory) that calculates angular separations and times of closest approach from a list of positions.

Roger Sinnott of *Sky and Telescope* made more elaborate calculations for the June 17 event and found that, at their closest at 8:51 p.m. Babylon time, the two planets were 15° above the western horizon. Using the *Long Ephemeris Tape*, the most accurate ephemeris available, DeYoung and Hilton at the U. S. Naval Observatory found that the centers of the two planets came to within 25 arcseconds of each other as seen from the center of the earth.

The major uncertainty in the Jupiter-Regulus conjunctions is in the position of Regulus in 3–2 B.C. Errors in the proper motion of Regulus could shift its position by as much as 1/8th degree and the times of the corresponding conjunctions by up to a day.

Used with permission of Griffith Observatory
1 Revelation 22:16.
2 2 Peter 1:19.
3 Isaiah 60:3.
4 Luke 1:78–79.
6 Revelation 5:5.
7 Olcott, Star Lore of All Ages, 233.
8 Mark 1:2.
9 Numbers 24:17.
10 Numbers 24:19.
12 Genesis 49:10.
15 Isaac Asimov, The Planet That Wasn’t, 222.
16 The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, XII.51.
18 Matthew 2:2.
20 Matthew 2:11.
21 Matthew 2:16.
22 Matthew 2:9.
23 Kittel, Theological Dictionary, VII.648.
24 Matthew 2:9.
26 Matthew, Homily, VI.3.
27 Expositor’s Greek Testament, I.73.
28 F. Cumont, Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans, 89.
30 Malachi 4:2.
31 Eliade, Cosmos and History, 51–62.
33 John 10:22.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.