

The Timeline of the Visit of the Magi

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A. Who were the Magi?

- Persian wise men—astrologers (which was considered a science at the time).
- They would have access to the writings of the Prophet Daniel who was, himself, a Magi.
 - *“Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.”* (Daniel 2:48, ESV)
 - They would have known about Daniel’s **Seventy Week Prophecy** (Daniel 9:20-27), the timeframe of which began in 445 BC. Thus, the Magi would have known to be on the lookout for strange events to be happening in Judah.

B. When did they see the Star and what did they see?

- *“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”* (Matthew 2:1-2 ESV)
- This was no ordinary star, nor was it a comet as that was considered a bad omen at the time.

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- Most likely what the Magi saw was a conjunction between Jupiter, Saturn and the Moon which happened in the early morning hours on April 17, 6 BC.¹
 - This remarkable celestial event might have alerted the Magi to the fact that something unusual was about to happen in Judah.²
 - The Persian Magi saw Jupiter as the Star of the Supreme God and Saturn as the Star of the King.
 - According to a text entitled, *Tetrabiblos*, by Greek Scholar Claudius Ptolemy (AD 137) the constellation of Aries was clearly associated during the time of Christ with the Jews and the nation of Judah.³
- These Magi would also have known of the prophecy recorded in Numbers 23:17, *I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth* (ESV).
- Thus, these Babylonian astronomers would have “followed” a star only based on its astrological significance—that a messiah-king would be born in Syria-Palestine—and they headed to a leading political center in the region, King Herod’s court.

¹ Astronomer Michael Molnar suggested that a conjunction theory might be correct in his book “[The Star of Bethlehem](#)” (Rutgers University Press, 1999). If the “star” was the result of a conjunction, then there are a number of different alignments that could be the culprit.

Perhaps the most promising, and the one favored by Mathews, is an alignment of [Jupiter](#), [Saturn](#), the [moon](#) and the sun in the constellation of [Aries](#) on April 17, 6 BC. This conjunction fits with the story for a few reasons. First, this conjunction happened in the early morning hours, which aligns with the Gospel’s description of the Star of Bethlehem as a rising morning star. The Magi also lost sight of the star, before seeing it come to rest in the place where baby Jesus lay in the stable. This could have been the result of the retrograde motion of Jupiter, which means that it appears to change direction in the night sky as Earth’s orbit overtakes it.

“Normally, planets move eastward if you’re following them in the sky,” Mathews said. “But when they go through retrograde motion, they turn around and go in the direction that the stars rise and set at night [westward].”

Two other conjunctions around a similar time also look promising. One is the meeting of Jupiter, [Venus](#) and the star [Regulus](#) in the constellation of [Leo](#) on June 17, 2 BC. Without the aid of a telescope, the two planets would appear as a single “star,” brighter than Venus and Jupiter individually. Another conjunction occurred in 6 BC, between Jupiter, Saturn and [Mars](#) in the constellation of [Pisces](#). But neither of these latter two conjunctions match the description in the New Testament as closely as the conjunction that occurred on April 17, 6 BC (<https://www.space.com/star-of-bethlehem>. Retrieved January 2, 2022).

² Jeffrey, Grant (2002). *Unveiling Mysteries of the Bible*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 178.

³ Claudius Ptolemy (1940). *Tetrabiblos*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

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- QUESTION: Did they leave immediately? Not likely. Such a journey would take approximately 3 months.
- SEE SECTION “E” because when the Star reappears in Matthew 2:9-10 it is very different from what the Magi originally saw in Persia!

C. When was Jesus born?

- Best estimate is 5 BC for several reasons:
 1. Jesus was most certainly born in 5 BC because Herod the Great died in 4 BC.
 - Josephus recorded that Herod died following a lunar eclipse and before a Passover.
 - This lunar eclipse took place on March 13, 4 BC, about 29 days before Passover. Thus, Herod died in the Spring of 4 BC.
 2. Jesus almost certainly had to have been born during the Autumn of 5 BC because of certain known facts about His life and ministry.
 - He began his public ministry at age 30 as was customary for Jewish rabbis: *“Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age ...”* (Luke 3:23 ESV).
 - His public ministry lasted 33½ years (dated because of the 3 Passover celebrations that He attended during his public ministry).
 - His Crucifixion almost certainly happened in AD 30 (and no later than AD 32, but this date is not likely).

D. When did the Magi arrive in Jerusalem?

- No later than the Spring of 4 BC because of the death of Herod the Great.
- No earlier than 40 days after the birth of Jesus in 5 BC. **Why?**
 1. Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day following His birth as was required by the Law of Moses: *“And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised”* (Leviticus 12:3 ESV).
 2. Mary would have been ceremonially unclean forty days: *“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed.”* (Leviticus 12:1-4 ESV).

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3. Mary had to complete forty days of purification before she presented Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem: *“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”* (Leviticus 3:6-8 ESV).
4. Mary and Joseph were unafraid to present Jesus in the Temple 40 days after His birth where the required offerings were presented and where they would encounter Simeon and Anna (cf. Luke 2:21-38).

➤ Therefore, the Magi almost certainly arrived in Jerusalem immediately after this forty-day period for several significant reasons:

1. The required activities cited above.
2. The fact that there was no further need for Joseph and Mary to stay in Bethlehem, thus their return to Nazareth was imminent. (After all, Nazareth was his hometown and the source of his livelihood!)
3. Plus, Mary has now recovered from childbirth and is able to make a long journey.

E. The Star in Matthew 2:9-10 is very different!

- *“After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”* (Matthew 2:9-10 ESV).
- This is describing a **supernatural star** because absolutely no known star—or any other celestial phenomena—could have “gone before” the Magi and then come to “rest over the place where the child was.”

F. The Timing of the Journey to Egypt.

- Began after the visit of the Magi and following the dream the Lord gave Joseph.
- Ended after the death of Herod the Great in the Spring of 4 BC—approximately four or five months after their departure from Bethlehem.
- Furthermore, a careful examination of the Biblical text will present several significant facts that utterly destroy the concept that Jesus was two years old when the Magi arrived:

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1. The text does not state that the star appeared to the Magi on the date of the Messiah's birth. Herod merely ordered the slaughter of all the male children under the age of two to make sure the newborn King of the Jews would be destroyed.
2. Scripture reveals the fact that forty days after his birth, Joseph and Mary presented Jesus at the Temple: *"And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the **child** Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law."* (Luke 2:17 ESV).
3. The word "child" used here is the Greek word *παιδίον* (*paidion*) which literally means **"a very young child, infant,"** or more specifically, **"a newborn child."**
4. Matthew states: *"On coming to the house, they saw the **Child** with His mother Mary, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh."* (Matthew 2:11 ESV).
5. Once again, the Greek word *παιδίον* (*paidion*) is used, indicating that Matthew is referring to a newborn Jesus and not a two-year-old Jesus such as medieval artists portray. This erroneous concept has its origins in Catholicism.