

What Was The "Star Of Bethlehem?"

PHILADELPHIA—An old superstition persists that science at the time year 1 dissolved into ways contradicts religion. Many that there is no evidence that any ministers and scientists will tell one but the Magi ever saw the you this is not the case. They star. Apparently Herod didn't; his high priests hadn't noticed it; and the shepherds who spent their nights outdoors were not guided to the stable by a star.

Only the wise men noted it. Why? Some scholars believe, as was mentioned before, that this was so



STAR OF BETHLEHEM mystery still confuses science.

chamber during the holiday season to hear and see the story of the Nativity and the mysterious star which led the wise men to Bethlehem.

What was the star?

Dr. I. M. Levi, Franklin Institute Planetarium director, and his associates dramatize an answer in the holiday show which originated in Philadelphia. They believe it was not a star in the scientific tradition, but a rare conjunction or close passing of the planets Jupiter and Saturn.

How did they and other scholars arrive at this conclusion? A careful study was made of all written records, ecclesiastical, scientific, historical and philosophical. But the main source of their information came from scripture. In the Bible you will read:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-10)

The Magi's question reached King Herod's ears. Herod sent for the Magi, heard their story, and dispatched them to Bethlehem with orders to report back to him. Scripture tells us that the star went before them, until it came and stood over the place where the child was.

This is how the wise men sought and found Jesus. They worshipped Him and offered royal gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Other wise men in all the centuries since the birth of Jesus have puzzled over the Christmas star. Astronomers never recorded a strange light in the sky

lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered."

The exact time of the taxation mentioned in this passage was unknown for a long time. However, in 1923, near Ankara, Turkey, there was found a Roman temple inscription which, when deciphered, relates that in the reign of Caesar Augustus there were three great tax collections. One was in 28 B.C., the second in 8 B.C., and the third in 14 A.D.

The taxation in 28 B.C. was much too early to have been the one mentioned in the Scriptures as it was too close to the accession of Augustus. The taxation that took place in 14 A.D. was much too late as it followed too long after the death of Herod.

And it was Herod who ordered the slaughter of all baby boys under two years of age in the hope of destroying Jesus. The only tax that fits the description is that of 8 B.C.

It is then conceivable that Jesus was born a year later, about 7 B.C., as it probably would have taken a year for the taxation decree to have reached Galilee. And this date would coincide with the date of the planets' conjunction. But the calendar date of Christ's birth is less important than the fact that He was born. And while it is fascinating to probe the past and ask who the wise men were, and what was the star they followed, it is not the star, but the scene it illuminated that has captured men's hearts.

This fact is recognized and the Nativity is depicted in the Franklin Institute Planetarium program, "Star of Bethlehem," which is shown only at the Christmas season.

During the remainder of the year the Franklin Institute Planetarium does, however, present other programs such as "Visitors from Space," for Institute officials know that man is always willing to look up at the sky and wonder.

because the star was not a true star at all, but a rare triple conjunction or passing of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. Scholars reason that the Magi were Persian astrologers who by their beliefs would see mystical significance in such a phenomenon. They thus felt compelled to follow the "star" wherever it led.

Today, however, such mystical significance is not attributed to a triple conjunction, as science can explain it thoroughly. When viewed from the Earth, Jupiter and Saturn pass each other in the sky. Triple conjunctions of Jupiter, Saturn and the Earth take place every 125 years. The last one occurred in 1941.

The next question that usually comes to mind is why are there no written astronomical records about such a rare celestial event occurring in the year 1 A.D.?

Because, according to some scholars, this conjunction or passing appeared in the year 7 B.C. And it seems likely that Jesus was born in the spring of the year 7 or 6 B.C.

Scholars substantiate this claim by again using written records to obtain the terms of office of various Roman officials and the dates of major tax collections of the period.

According to the Gospel of Saint Luke: "...there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and

lineage of David.) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered."

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The Glory Of The Nativity Found In Paintings By The Old Masters

DETROIT (NEA) — Art, handmaid of religion, never serves so happily as it does at Christmas.

All over the world, people going to churches, museums and private collections see the Nativity of Christ through the eyes of the Old Masters.

In this country, probably the most fascinating Christmas scene will be in the Detroit Institute of Arts. "The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child" is by Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci, the only authentic painting by Leonardo in his youth and one of the few in the world.

If you don't know its story you wonder why the Virgin is just a transparent ghostly figure, a dark outline on flat white, while the Infant Jesus and His Angels are so realistically painted. Here it is.

It was painted at least a decade before Columbus discovered America, when Leonardo was an apprentice in the workshop of Andrea and it was the custom for the master to block in his rough idea, paint a part of it and leave the rest to "his boys."

Legend relates for a painting of "The Baptism of Christ" Andrea did just this; he turned it over to Leonardo and did not see the work until it was finished.

Finally, it was brought to Andrea where he was working. He looked at it for a long time, enthralled by its beauty, so far had his pupil surpassed him. He threw down his brush, never to lift it again.

William Suhr is the American authority on the condition of old paintings. He probably was not the first to notice the contrasts in the work between the heavy, earthy face and lumpily painted figure of the Virgin, and the Heavenly Infant and Angels. Especially at the Metropolitan Museum

of Art in New York, there will be the figures wearing the costumes of the time. Even the angels are "Nativity" painted in early 1500's, dressed like pious peasants.

Suhr and other authorities said the Virgin had been painted over. Only Suhr would have dared to discover what was underneath. Fluorescent light experiments showed he was right. In its 600 years the Virgin had been done over, completely so rather recently, probably within the last 50 years. Suhr carefully removed layers of paint down to the bare board. He found Andrea had painted as his suggestion to his pupil the ghost outline of the Virgin on the gesso.

That's what we see in Detroit today. Left side of the picture is the kneeling Virgin, brushed in outline, the six-century-old strokes protected only by a thin layer of varnish. Her pose is straight-ahead, stiff. Her features are heavy. But how glorious is the right-hand group, with its background landscape typical of the country around Florence. This is the work of a plodding old man and of a young genius.

Many other wonderful Christmas paintings are in America. Comparable to the Detroit Leonardo is "The Adoration of the Shepherds" by Giorgione in the Samuel H. Kress Collection in the National Gallery in Washington. The great painter-poet-musician, Giorgione, died when he was only 30. Little of his work remains today but it was the height of the Renaissance.

If you are in Florida at Christmas time, you will see the beautiful "Holy Family with the Infant Jesus" in the Ringling Museum at Sarasota. It is by Fra Bartolomeo, friend of Raphael, influenced by Giorgione. At the Metropolitan Museum



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