

# The Light of the World

sermon digest

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Matthew 2:1-12

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The 1986 appearance of Halley's Comet prompted religion professor William Phipps to write an article in *Theology Today* (April, 1986) suggesting a possible tie between Halley's Comet and Matthew's Epiphany story of the visitation of the Magi at the birth of Jesus. The once-in-a-lifetime appearance of Halley's Comet dates to 66 CE within a few years of the writing of Matthew's Gospel. The Jewish historian Josephus described the phenomenon as "a comet resembling a sword hanging over Jerusalem." It was followed in 70 CE with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem ending the existence of a Jewish State for next nineteen centuries. Phipps suggests that Matthew's witness of Halley's Comet and the ominous event in Jerusalem that followed may have influenced his story about the birth of Jesus. Matthew may have been privy to stories from elders about the bright heavenly light appearing in 12 BCE within range of modern estimates of the birth year of Jesus. Like Matthew, the medieval artist Giotto witnessed Halley's Comet in 1301. In his famous 1305 painting "The Visitation of the Magi," Halley's Comet is clearly pictured with its long tail in the night sky above the nativity.

The astrophysical event has had a long history of religious importance. When Halley's Comet appeared to Bostonians in 1682, Cotton Mather, a graduate of Harvard College and Puritan pastor of North Church, took advantage of the opportunity and the ignorance of the population to warn of impending judgment from God. The young pastor advised Bostonians that the comet was an omen from God, calling the evil city to repentance. Witnesses reported that the apocalyptic threat was effective for a couple of years in changing behavior and church attendance. Historically it might have influenced the revivals that followed in the Great Awakening.

Halley's Comet follows a seventy-six year orbit that in 1910 came within 14 million miles of earth, relatively much closer than the 40 million mile norm. That was also the year of Mark Twain's death. Twain, born Samuel Clemmons in 1835, wrote: "I came in with Halley's comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. . . . The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.'" Although 1910 newspapers identified the astrophysical event as a natural phenomenon that would soon pass, it was viewed by many as the apocalyptic end of the world. Rumors raged. The photographic identity of a poison gas in the tail of the comet produced fear of total extermination of life from planet earth. People gobbled up gas masks and anti-comet pills marketed for protection. Others turned to ancient interpretations of religion for the meaning of the phenomenal light in the heavens.

***The glory of God is projected from the heavens.*** Heavenly lights from stars and comets have a long history of religious significance crossing cultural and national lines. Today is Epiphany Sunday. Tuesday, the twelfth day of Christmas, is the Epiphany in the Christian calendar. We are reminded again that Epiphany means the appearance or manifestation of God. The Gospel reference is our text on the visitation of the Magi from the East.

Matthew's Epiphany story would not have been strange to the early readers of the Gospel. The story has a credible connection to Eastern Persian religion, known in the ancient world for its priestly students of the stars, and would have been viewed by first century people with both acceptance and awe. In Jewish thought, the stars were thought to be angels, sons of God carrying messages for the witnesses on earth. Light was the creation of God associated throughout the Bible with the divine presence. Darkness, the absence of light, was the place where evil lurks. According to Genesis 1, the first act of God in creation was "Let there be light," breaking through the darkness of chaos with sun and moon.

The glory of God, in Hebrew *shekinah*, was visualized as a brilliant light. Shepherds in Luke encountered the angelic revelation of the birth of the child, and "the glory of the Lord shone around them." They sang *gloria in excelsis*, "Glory to God in the highest heavens." At the circumcision and blessing of the child Jesus in the Temple, the elder Simeon offered a doxology as he took the baby Jesus into his arms, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

In the Gentile world, stars were commonly believed to be heavenly messengers revealing significant moments in history. Stars were believed to "rise" at the time of the birth of great men and disappear with their deaths. We reflect the primitive cosmology in our reference to famous athletes

and actors as “stars.” Virgil claimed that a star guided Aeneas to the place where Rome was to be founded. Because the births and deaths of great leaders were accompanied by astrological phenomena, Nero feared the appearance of a comet on several successive nights. He thus had several leaders of Rome executed. In his twisted mind the stars were not too particular about who was appointed to die. The coincidence of the star of Bethlehem and the execution of the innocents by Herod not only reminded Jews of the birth of Moses, it fit the secular world where they lived.

In the age of science, three explanations have been popular for the identity of the miraculous star of Bethlehem which led the Magi to Jesus. In addition to theories about Halley’s Comet, Johannes Kepler suggested in the seventeenth century that Matthew’s star was a nova or supernova which explodes with such brilliant light that it can sometimes be seen in daylight. Kepler also launched a third and more likely possibility in the phenomenal conjunction of planets. He calculated the recurrence every 805 years, placing the astronomical event close to 6 B.C. the approximate year of Christ’s birth; but similarities to comets, exploding stars, and overlapping planets begin to break down in the careful reading of Matthew’s report on the birth of Jesus.

The star of Bethlehem did not behave like any star of which we are aware. Matthew’s description of a star, like the sun, rising at the birth of Jesus and leading the Magi to the manger and stopping over the child is not consistent with what we know of stars. More than a heavenly phenomenon, Matthew probably intended to proclaim another direct revelation from God at the birth of Jesus like the miraculous conceptions of John and Jesus and the appearance of angels announcing the holy birth.

***The universe itself announces Emmanuel, God with us.*** Although I find the search of science in connection to the star of Bethlehem to be fascinating, the attempt to verify the Gospel account as historically and scientifically accurate not only misses the message, it often produces more heat than light on the subject.

At the ripe old age of ten I had been to a Sunday School party at church and was walking the six blocks home on a clear December night. The city water tower with its Christmas star in lights was easily visible and caught my attention as I started home. Beyond the tower, real stars were dancing against the night sky, and my ten-year-old mind began to ponder the star which guided the wise men from the East. At first, I wondered if the star were still burning in the heavens. Then, I began to sort through the heavenly lights to determine which one it was. You will be pleased to know that I found it. At least in my mind, I located the star which had led the wise men, and I was supported in my discovery. My star followed me all the way home. I did not have a clue about Halley’s comet, the character of Persian religion, or the Greek and Roman mysticism about the heavenly lights; but I had a child’s perception of the reality of God that was not far removed from the outlook of first century Jews during the life of Jesus.

I have a tendency to recall that night every time I have a moment to view the glorious mystery the stars and every time I read Matthew’s story of the Magi from the East following a star to the place where Christ was born. I think that I came close to Matthew’s intended meaning. Perhaps I did not locate *the* star of Bethlehem, but I most certainly identified a star which was sparkling in the heavens when Christ was born. Something about the stars ties us to the ages.

The Psalmist (8) perceived the Eternal in the glory of God: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Even when the stars were thought to be heavenly lights in an earth-centered cosmos, they projected more than light; they sent out a message about the magnitude and wonder of the world which God has created.

Far beyond the limits set by our science-oriented outlook, Matthew directs our attention to the larger picture—the God of the creation, the author of the sun, the moon, and the stars in the heavens, the God who speaks not only to Jews and Christians of the world, but to Eastern religious mystics and students of the stars. What an Epiphany! Thanks be to God!