
The Star Stops Over Us, Everywhere!

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral***

It's the week of Epiphany! It's time for my annual explanation of what the Star of Bethlehem was, and what it means. As an amateur astronomer, I take a special interest in the star that "stopped over the place where the child was." Matthew 2:9 says that "when they [the magi] had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was."

When I talk about the possibility of that famous star, the "Star of Bethlehem," I start with that verse, because it says something that should bewilder us, whether we fancy ourselves serious astronomers or not. The verse says that "it stopped over the place where the child was."

Now, if you were to go outside under a starlit sky, how in the world could you possibly tell that a particular heavenly body — whether the moon, or a planet, or a star — was directly over you, or directly over someone, say, fifty miles away? Obviously, the night sky is so vast, and the heavenly bodies so far away, that there is no way of saying that a star is over one place on earth, and not over another! (Unless we are at a Christmas Pageant, and the wonderful star, about three feet wide, is being held aloft over a manger scene! Get that notion out of your mind for a minute!)

Here beginneth, then, my meager analysis of what led the magi. (I use here the analysis of Michael Molnar, a retired astronomer of Rutgers University.) First of all, the "wise men" were magi, or astrologers — not astronomers in our modern sense of the word. They associated heavenly bodies like the planets, and the moon, and constellations, with people and times of life. The constellation, Aries, was associated with the Judeans. And, the planet, Jupiter, was "the regal star that conferred kingships."

Well, present-day "true astronomy" historians know that, in 6 BC, when the moon was passing through the constellation Aries, the moon also "occulted," or "passed over," Jupiter. When Jupiter emerged from behind the moon, the olden-day astrologers were to assume a royal birth of some sort, and Aries was the sign of Judea! Thus, a king of the Judeans had been born, emerging from behind the moon. Furthermore, Jupiter then "stopped!" Yes, the planets that are outside the orbit of the earth appear to "stop" in the night sky, occasionally, when the earth passes them, in our smaller orbit. Our earth orbits the sun inside the orbit of Jupiter. At the point when the earth passes Jupiter, Jupiter goes "retrograde;" that is, it appears to us to reverse direction and to go backwards in the night sky.

That, I believe is what the gospeller Matthew means when he says that the "star stopped over the place where the child was." It means that the "star" (the planet, Jupiter) appeared to stop in the night sky. *My sense is that when the planet Jupiter "stopped," the important thing was where the magi were! The important thing was not where the star (or planet) was! Wherever the magi were when the planet stopped, had to be the place. And, wherever they were on their journey, that was where the Christ, the Messiah, had been born. They went into the house (yes, in Matthew's version, they go into a house, not a stable) and found Mary and the child.*

It might be an explanation that works. The important thing is that a light shone in the darkness, and that light was the light of the world. Or, as John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Furthermore, the important thing is that the light is stopping over you. Yes, you. And the light is stopping over me. And all of us. "The star stopped over the place where the child was." We are all children where the star stops to shine over us, wherever we are. All of us.

This season of Epiphany is the season of celebrating light growing in the world, and light growing in us. Think of yourself as the place where the star stops to shine. When we celebrate the baptism of Jesus on this coming First Sunday After the Epiphany, we will hear that a voice from heaven declared, "Behold, you are my child. In you, I am well pleased." That child is also us! The star stops over us, each and every one of us, the place where the child is, the place where Christ is born, the place where God is well pleased.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler

Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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