

Being an astronomer, as well as a priest, people were always asking me about the Star of Bethlehem. “What was it?” they would ask. “I don’t have the foggiest,” I would tell them.

A star shining over the manger in Bethlehem is one of the strongest images we have of Christmas and yet we only hear of the star in one brief and enigmatic account in the Gospel of Matthew.

Lots of people have speculated about what the star might have been: a comet or perhaps a supernova. Personally, I had no strong preference for one explanation over another. For me, the star was always secondary to the main Gospel message; namely, that Jesus came not only to save the Jews, but the gentiles too, as represented by pagan astrologers from the East, the Magi.

That is, I didn’t have a strong opinion until about 10 years ago when I read *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (Rutgers University Press) by Michael Molnar, a former astronomer at Rutgers University.

Molnar’s interest in the star of Bethlehem began quite by accident. He is an amateur collector of ancient coins and, in the spring of 1991, he obtained several Roman coins minted in the city of Antioch around the year 6 AD by the governor of Syria, a man by the name Quirinius. On one side of the coin is an image of Zeus; no surprise there. However, on the other side there was the strange image of a leaping ram looking backwards at a star.

The scene is intriguing if you recall the Gospel of Luke which tells us that Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Molnar asked himself: Could this be The Star?

Molnar began to investigate the possible meaning of these coins by studying the arcane beliefs of first-century astrologers known as Magi. He

discovered that astrologers had assigned Aries as the astrological symbol for Judea and that an eclipse of Jupiter by the moon in the constellation of Aries might well be interpreted as a herald of the Messiah’s coming.

So, could the coins have been issued by the Romans as a response to a great messianic portent, the Star of Bethlehem?



Using computers to simulate the position of the stars and planets, Molnar found that indeed an eclipse of Jupiter by the moon in the constellation of Aries while rising in the east occurred on April 17, 6 BC, well within the time period historians believe Jesus was born.

Molnar’s hypothesis gained further support when he found an independent reference to this very alignment written by a fourth century AD Roman astrologer who commented specifically

on the singular conditions of April 17, 6 BC as befitting the birth of a “divine and immortal” person.

What I have just described are only the highlights of Molnar’s interpretation of Matthew’s perplexing reference to a star. If you are interested in finding out more, I encourage you to read his book. I find his arguments compelling. He shows how Matthew’s enigmatic passages about a star can make perfect sense if we remember that the Magi were astrologers and that the Gospel text is referring to astrological events.

Now, you may be asking yourself, why would the Romans commemorate the birth of a Jewish Messiah by placing Aries and a star on their coins? Well, Rome was well aware of the messianic prophecies and this regal portent and may have feared a Jewish revolt. Roman provincial coinage served as a primary means of disseminating propaganda supporting the goals of Rome. The leaping ram and the star may have been meant to subvert the Star of Bethlehem and twist its meaning to benefit the Emperor.

The coins begin to appear in Syria at exactly the time Rome annexed Judea to Syria. The message to the Jews would have been clear: “You all know there was a regal portent in Aries and that a king was given unto you but his name is not Messiah but Caesar! Behold, I, Caesar, have annexed Judea to Syria, thus wiping its name from the face of the Earth forever as proof of my power.”

But, to quote the English writer C. S. Lewis, “...those who will not be God’s sons will be His tools.” By striking these coins, the Romans quite unwittingly became God’s tools by leaving behind tangible, physical, historical evidence that indeed a star once shown over a little town in Judea the day the King of the Universe was born.

Father McGonagle is available to speak to parish and school groups about the Star of Bethlehem and may be contacted at Our Lady of the Valley Parish, Easthampton, 413.527.9778 or fr.mcgonagle@gmail.com.