

# Even the Stars Obey

## Genesis 1:6-18; Psalm 1; Matthew 2:1-10



Stars don't generally mean a whole lot to us. Often they are little more than pretty lights in the night sky we notice only infrequently. For some they hold more interest as objects of fascinating study and discovery through telescopes and space travel or fiction fantasy. For millennia, however, many cultures gave much greater attention to the starlit skies than we are prone to give. Rather than worlds of science fiction, the stars were for them the visible sphere of the world of the gods. The ancients believed the stars were living beings, either gods or messengers of the gods. So what are we to make of the astrologers recorded in Matthew's account, who came to worship Jesus?

Amid the many explanations of the stars among the surrounding peoples, the Hebrew narrative in Genesis strikes a very dissonant note as to the existence, role, and purpose of the stars. While the Babylonians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites held the stars to be divine beings, Genesis describes them as impersonal lights. In the Genesis account, they are devoid of status, initiative, and will. They are diminished as lights in the ceiling of the heavens—bulbs in the firmament. While we may be tempted to treat that as a scientific description that meshes well with our current understanding of astronomy, we should note that this is not a scientific description so much as a theological lesson. Genesis does not deal so much with what the stars are, but with what they are not.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective, we miss the strident note in Genesis 1. The lights in the sky are not beings with personal identity, will, action, and decision. They are timepieces and lights to keep the world from darkness. Rather than participants in the acts of creation, the stars are part of the created order, designed by God to function in a prescribed manner. They are under subjection to the will of God and fulfill the roles assigned by the Creator.

How different this narrative would sound to the ears of the Egyptians who believed the sun to be the highest of the gods. How strange this would be to the Chaldeans who studied the stars to determine the will and messages of the gods to humanity. Genesis recasts the heavens as subdued unto the will of the Creator. Rather than serving as a writing tablet of the gods, the heavens are the ceiling on which God has hung myriads of lamps to illuminate the created order.

And God said, "Let there be light." And light came to be. Then sun, moon, and stars were hung in their places and shed light on the earth, establishing boundaries for time and seasons of time. While the nations of old attributed divine characteristics to elements of the created order, Genesis makes them seem mechanical. While modern science bestows upon them no intrinsic purpose, Genesis casts them as timepieces in obedience to God's command.

The picture of the earth in Genesis is comforting, for it establishes a system functioning under God's direction, decree, and purpose. It is a world of order arising in the midst of a watery chaos. It is a sign of purpose for an otherwise futile existence. It is a created whole that exists to uphold life and obey the will of the Creator.

The psalmist reminds us of our position in life before the Creator. He would remind us that we are placed here under God's direction, provision, and care. He would remind us that our lives are best

spent in following the Torah—the instruction—of our Creator. If God has taken such care to fashion a world that will provide for our needs, ought we not to listen and heed the Creator's instruction?

Matthew casts a curious tale we have grown too accustomed to hearing. He speaks of the magi—the astrologers—who came to pay homage to the Christ child. How would they know of Jesus' birth and the purpose of His life? They claimed to have heard in a manner that offends our reading of the Genesis account. They claim to have seen Jesus' star—his angel, messenger, birth announcement recorded in the heavenly message board! That they observed a heavenly phenomenon is of little import, what should astound us is that they interpreted it correctly!

How out-of-character for the Bible to affirm announcement of Jesus' birth through means it declares to be without merit. Matthew gives us no explanation for this strange occurrence. He does not bother helping us understand why and how the stars could or should communicate with these magi who report to have read God's message of Jesus' birth in the stars of heaven. We know full well that this should never have occurred. We know full well that the Bible gives no validity to those who study the stars to report to the King of Babylon or to any other.

And yet, the magi have come. They come with a strange message, yet one we should accept as obvious. The stars are yet under the command of the Creator. God may not make it a habit to announce His will to humanity through the stars, and yet God spoke to these who were seeking. God desired to make the birth of Jesus known, even to these who should be rejected outright. Regardless of the means God used to communicate to them, they came to worship. They came in subjection and recognition that the Creator had done something special with this birth in Bethlehem.

They came to pay homage to a child, and in so doing pay homage to the One who ordered the stars. Mary and Joseph must have been confused by their coming. Jerusalem was definitely all in a buzz. Nothing in the background of Scripture should have prepared them to expect Messiah's birth to be announced in the configuration of the stars. They didn't know what to make of the coming of the magi, just as they did not know what to make of Jesus. Even so, the magi came. They were Gentiles, but God chose to include them in this announcement of Messiah's birth. "We have seen his star in the East and have come to pay him homage."

While Jerusalem was in tumult over the announcement of the magi and the question of Herod's reaction to the message, the magi came focused on the message they had received. They were not worried over what Jews would think of astrological signs announcing the birth of Messiah. They were intent on paying homage to the One the stars announced.

If the stars saw fit to announce a birth in deference to the Creator's will, should these not also pay homage? We should not be amazed that stars might obey the Creator. We should be amazed rather at how often we choose not to obey. Gentiles came to honor the One born to be the King of the Jews, yet with so many of that day, we too often overlook Him. If the stars would obey, should we not as well? If the magi come to pay homage before the Christ of God, shall our lives respect and honor Him less? We do well to consider the Psalmist's warning and heed God's instruction. If the magi and the stars can obey, how shall we respond?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*