

Sharing the gospel using star imagery by Roland Clarke

Introduction

A church friend asked me to deliver a small cash gift to her relative in jail. It so happened there were two other people waiting at the front door for the same reason. We each answered a series of questions through the intercom. This process took almost 15 minutes before we finally received our receipts and were free to leave.

During this time the three of us struck up a conversation. One lady explained how her boy-friend had gone into the jail five weeks ago but she wasn't allowed to visit him because of an outbreak of COVID.

I felt a flicker of pity for Jan but once I had my receipt in hand I promptly started walking back to my car, eager to get on with life. In my typical haste I started taking a short cut across the snow covered grass field toward the parking lot some 50 yards away. But suddenly I had a second thought: "Why was I in such a hurry to get home?" "What about taking a more leisurely walk back on the pavement? Could this perhaps open a door to share some final words with the person I had felt sorry for moments earlier?"

I listened to the small voice and returned to the side-walk. I was able to naturally resume making small talk with Jan. Then, as she approached her car, not far from mine, I commented about a movie I'd seen three years ago with my grandchildren. I asked Jan if she had ever heard of the movie called *The Star*?" She appeared somewhat puzzled, so I assumed she didn't know about it and I said, "Oprah Winfrey played a role in the movie." Suddenly her face lit up and I took a pamphlet out of my pocket entitled, "[Following the star](#)." Showing it to her, I said, "This article was published around the same time the movie came out."

Jan looked at it and said in a surprised voice, "Are you giving this to me?" I replied, "Sure, you're welcome to keep it." Her face lit up with a big smile as she exclaimed, "That's amazing. Thank you so much."

Who would have thought receiving this article would mean so much to her? What if I hadn't changed my mind and sought her out? Maybe most people shun or ignore her. No matter what, everyone deserves to hear God loves them and discover the truth about Jesus. It is our privilege to give them that opportunity.

The apostle Paul instructed ordinary, everyday Christians in Colosse to speak with unbelievers in a gracious, seasoned-with-salt manner. He urged them to prayerfully and watchfully make the most of the doors God opens up in our daily lives to give a reason for our hope. In keeping with these instructions, I want to discuss an important Bible topic which can be a segue helping us point people to Jesus as the bright Morning Star. I trust you will take two minutes to read the pamphlet titled, [Following the Star](#).

This pamphlet focuses on the star theme but in order to grasp the wider implications we also need to examine the closely related idea of the Messianic King. The close connection between star & King is evident in the story of the Magi who, upon sighting a special star, immediately concluded that a king was born. For this reason, I want to explore the idea of Jesus as the Messianic 'sceptre and star' as foretold by a Gentile seer named Balaam.

Two months ago I enjoyed dinner in the home of a Kurdish family/friend. They had a star on top of their nicely decorated Christmas tree which sparked an interesting conversation. I commented that

the star reminded me of an article I recently read on the internet explaining a tradition among Kurdish people which acknowledges that in the first century their ancestors followed a star that led them to Bethlehem. They paid homage to Jesus as the new-born King of the Jews. This [Kurdish tradition](#) involving Magi/astrologers traces as far back as the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians centuries before the time of Christ. Interestingly, [historians](#) acknowledge that the “magi were a specific high-level caste associated with stars and wisdom in Persia.”

Further documentation supporting this can be seen in the abstract of a book by Zoe Misiewicz, titled, *Astrology, ancient Near East*, which is available online [here](#). Zoe explains that the starry sky was “a matter of great concern even to kings. Astrology was not isolated from other intellectual pursuits but played a central role in ancient Near Eastern intellectual life, with close connections both to other forms of divination and to astronomy. In fact, astrology was not expressly distinguished from astronomy in the cuneiform sources (Rochberg 1993: 11), and the same scholar might both observe the heavens and interpret the signs he saw there.”

Long before Jesus was born many prophets foretold that a kingly figure would arise who would be very great. We will begin by looking at two prophecies as recorded in the writings of Moses. Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24:15-17 says: “This is the message of Balaam son of Beor, ... who hears the words of God, ... who sees a vision from the Almighty, ... I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will rise from Jacob; a sceptre will emerge from Israel.” (NLT)

Similarly, in Genesis 49:10 Jacob predicted that kingship would belong to one particular tribe in Israel: “The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.” Here again we notice the term 'sceptre' as a symbol of rulership or kingship. Also notice that the line of kings coming from the tribe of Judah will climax with a supreme ruler to whom the nations will bow in obedience.

Five hundred years after Moses there arose a prophet named Nathan who foretold the particular family in the tribe from which the Messianic-King would arise: ““The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”” (2 Samuel 7:13-14)

Another prophet named Daniel made it clear that the Messiah's kingdom would be never ending and he will rule over all nations. “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)

Zechariah similarly foretold the worldwide scope of Messiah's reign, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, ... He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.” (Zechariah 9:9-10)

Then, some five hundred years later certain astrologers from the east (Magi) set out on an epic journey to find the new-born King of the Jews because they saw a star which they believed signalled his birth.

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

[After they had met with King Herod who consulted with Jewish religious leaders, the wise men] went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-11)

Notice that the Magi or wise men came from the east and they were searching for a new born king of the Jews. Interestingly, the first Scripture we looked at was an oracle by Balaam, a Gentile seer or mystic living in Ammon which is east of Israel. He predicted that a star and a scepter would eventually arise out of Israel. (The ancient nation of Ammon to which Balaam belonged, corresponds to modern day Jordan.) Almost a thousand years later a mighty prophet arose named Daniel who also prophesied the rise of a global king – God's Messiah. Although Daniel didn't explicitly describe the Messianic King as a star, there are unmistakable clues in his writings that point to the coming of a Messianic deliverer.

Daniel and his three Jewish comrades were ten times wiser than all the other Babylonian leaders-in-training. In fact, Daniel was appointed chief of all the wise men including the astrologers under King Nebuchadnezzar. Since Daniel was a devout Jew he would have known Balaam's famous prophecy about a star and sceptre, and, as the presiding chief minister in Babylon, Daniel probably would have informed his fellow wise men, especially the astrologers, about the remarkable prophecy of a star-sceptre arising out of Israel.

Five hundred years after Daniel, Balaam's mysterious oracle of a royal star-scepter became clearer when eastern wise men sighted a star signalling the birth of a king who was none other than baby Jesus, God's Messiah. As a true descendant of King David he was properly qualified to be the Messianic-King, even though he associated with common, ordinary people and did not wear kingly clothing or a crown.

When baby Jesus grew to full adulthood and started his public ministry his followers were impressed with the amazing healings he performed. These miraculous signs showed that he was truly sent by God, yet even his closest disciples found it difficult to understand his greater mission. Repeatedly, he prophesied that he would provide a ransom by laying down his life for the sake of others. “The son of man ... will be delivered over to the Gentiles ... they will flog him and kill him (but) On the third day he will rise again. The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.” (Luke 18:31-34; cf. Mark 10:45)

We can appreciate why it was so difficult for Christ's disciples to accept that he would be killed since their understanding of Messiah focused on the idea of a political-warrior king who they assumed would wage war using earthly weapons. Speaking to the Roman governor, Jesus said,

“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (John 19:36-37)

It was not until after Jesus was crucified and triumphantly rose from the dead that Christ's disciples realized what he really meant.

We've looked carefully at many predictions pertaining to a great Messianic-King who would arise in Israel but we've hardly given any attention to the idea or symbolism of a star. In 2 Peter 1:19-21 the prophetic message portrays the Messiah as a star, indeed, the bright Morning Star.

“We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

We also read in Revelation 22:16, “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” Obviously stars shine light, but there's one star that shines especially bright. It's called the Morning Star. The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would be a light to the gentiles bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6; cf John 4:42; 8:12; Acts 13:47; 26:23) The apostle Paul explained how Christ fulfilled this saving-light; “And now God has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and **illuminated** the way to life and immortality through the Good News.” (2 Timothy 1:10, NLT, bold added)

The star pamphlet highlights the **star** theme as an image of hope and salvation, whereas the above presentation highlights the **sceptre** theme implying kingship. Both themes are essential to the gospel, and yet, Jesus did not always emphasize both equally. For example, in his encounter with the Samaritans, as recorded in John four, Christ clearly placed greater emphasis on his role as the Messiah-Savior.

To be sure, the Samaritans followed a (false) cultic off-shoot of Judaism, and yet, Christ incorporated their Messianic belief as a part of the salvation message he preached. How could he do this? Likewise, we may ask: “Why did God include a Messianic prophecy spoken by a Gentile named Balaam who idolized money?” Scripture also includes a statement by the wicked High Priest Caiphas acknowledging, “it would be good if one man died for the people” thus confirming the gospel. (John 18:14) Why? Another curious example where Scripture quotes unbelievers 'approvingly' is found in Acts 17:28 where Paul cites two pagan poets/philosophers, Epimenides and Aratus, as part of his gospel sermon.

If God could accomplish his purpose by speaking through Balaam's donkey, what's to stop him from conveying truth through an evil diviner? Or, two pagan philosophers as mentioned above, or a murderous High Priest like Caiphas? Or even the Roman governor, Pilate who, against protestations from the Jewish religious leaders, declared Jesus to be “the King of the Jews.” (John 19:21-22)

How does this apply to our modern context? Influencer Oprah Winfrey is a religious syncretist, yet I did not hesitate to mention her key role in the animated film, *The Star*. Citing this famous name helped to spark Jan's curiosity, thus underscoring my purpose of pointing her to Jesus as presented in Scripture.

Points to ponder/discuss

Let's consider some different kinds of circumstances where one could appropriately broach the topic of stars ... morning star etc.

- 1) For obvious reasons during Christmas season when star emblems and images abound there are ample opportunities for engaging people in conversation about stars. But what about the rest of the year? For example, my encounter at the jail as mentioned in the story at the very beginning of this article happened two months after Christmas. Furthermore, the pamphlet *Following the Star* does not mention Christmas.
- 2) You recall that I broached this topic by asking a neighbor if she had seen the movie, *The Star*. Then I commented on (and offered) an opinion piece in a local paper which discussed the backstory to the movie.
- 3) People who read star signs and horoscopes may be curious to talk about the star of Bethlehem. A possible segue into talking about Jesus is to ask, "May I tell you about my favourite star sign?"
- 4) People from a Hindu background may be familiar with consulting a priest in order to obtain his reading of the stars so as to give advice about naming a baby... etc
- 5) Miscellaneous. "What a lovely **star** necklace (star wristband, star outfit, etc) you have!"
- 6) Some people like to read or study about astronomy. In recent years huge advances have been made in the field of astronomy, astrophysics etc. In fact, the term astronomy comes from the Greek word *aster* (star, also asteroid, the name Esther, etc)
- 7) I recently received a memento from a First Nations friend – a home-made necklace with a single red cube signifying a strawberry. Painted on the cube were tiny gold dots resembling a strawberry. She told me that according to her culture these dots mean stars. Sadly, she died not long after giving it to me. I am praying for an opportunity to show this memento to members of her family and, God willing, engage them in meaningful conversation pointing them to Jesus as the bright Morning Star.
- 8) I'm sure there are many other examples, for instance, there are stars on the flags of dozens of countries around the world, whether as a single star (27 country flags) or multiple stars or coupled with the moon, i.e. signifying Islam.

Postscript

The Bible clearly portrays the star of Bethlehem as a beautiful, hopeful sign that inspired Magi from the east to undertake a long journey to worship the new born Messianic king. Nevertheless, Scripture also mentions terrifying star signs ("falling stars") associated with judgment when the Messiah returns. A discussion of this important topic is available online [here](#).

Elsewhere Scripture associates stars with Divine judgment as seen in Jeremiah 8:2. The prophet Jeremiah warned the evil Israelites that their bones would be "spread out to the sun, the moon and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served, and which they have gone after and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped. They will not be gathered or buried; they will be as dung on the face of the ground." (cf. Deuteronomy 14:19)

Interestingly, Scripture portrays stars **positively** in relation to righteous people. True believers, for example, shine like stars in the universe, as they display godly qualities like, not grumbling and arguing (Philippians 2:14). In addition, true believers who influence/lead people toward righteousness "will shine like the stars forever and ever" at the final judgment when they are raised

to everlasting life. (Daniel 12:2-3)

But how shall we lead people to righteousness if we don't point them to Jesus, the **bright Morning Star** – the only human who lived a perfectly righteous life? Only through Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, can sinful humans be truly cleansed and accounted righteous. What a privilege to point people to Jesus Christ – “The true light that gives light to everyone...” (John 1:9)

A proper reading of star imagery points to Jesus

Interestingly, the Israeli flag features a star at its centre which probably implies a Messianic hope. Indeed, a proper understanding of the Bible points to Jesus as God's Messiah, “the Saviour of the world.” Christ himself, explained this to the Samaritans in Sychar over a two day period. (John 4:42)

One may ask, “What about the single star in the Ethiopian flag?” noting that Ethiopia boasts a 3,000 year connection to Biblical history going back to King Solomon. Furthermore, several other nations have adopted flags with a single star signifying 'hope' or 'aspirations for a bright future.'

Speaking of hope, the Old and New Testament declares that the Messiah “will bring justice through to victory. In his name the nations [Gentiles] will put their hope.” (Matthew 12:20-21; Isaiah 42:1-4) Is it possible to explain this Messianic hope using star imagery? I believe it is! If the apostle Paul could use an altar to an unknown god as a creative way to engage unbelievers in talking about the one true God, why shouldn't we do likewise with the hope-inspiring imagery of star(s) in Scripture?

All Bible quotes are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

If you have questions about the article or would like to discuss these themes further please contact me [here](#).