

Star of Bethlehem



Contents

- Gospel of St Matthew
 - The Magi and the 'Star' in the East
- Astronomical Candidates
 - How many possibilities are there?
 - How well do they fit the account of the 'Star'?
- Astronomical Dates
 - What happened when?
 - Do known events fit the timeline?
- Starry Night
 - Rewind the clock back to a few years BC
- Summary

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Magi and the 'Star'

The principal elements of Matthew's account

- * Magi journeyed to Jerusalem
 - ... prompted by a 'star in the east'
 - (It does not say that they *followed* the star)
- * Asked Herod about the 'King of the Jews'
- * Herod was **unaware** of the star
- * Magi journeyed to Bethlehem
 - ... where the star **re-appeared** in the south
 - ... and **stopped** over Bethlehem

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

We Three Kings

We **three** kings of **orient** are
... following yonder star

We **indeterminate number** of **men** of
unspecified geographic origin are
... **saw a star**

N wise men where $1 < N < \infty$

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Star of Bethlehem

What is a 'Star'?

Bear in mind that a 'star' doesn't necessarily mean a star in the sense that we understand it.

"wandering star" = **Planet**

"hairy star" = **Comet**

"shooting star" = **Meteor**

A 'star' means something seen in the night sky.



Any Clues?



Bloemaert 1624



Astrological Significance

Every planet, every bright star and every zodiacal constellation had an astrological significance.

For instance ...

Venus beauty – fertility – birth
Jupiter royalty – king of planets
Regulus king of stars
Leo lion of Judea

Think of the sky as God's Facebook page.

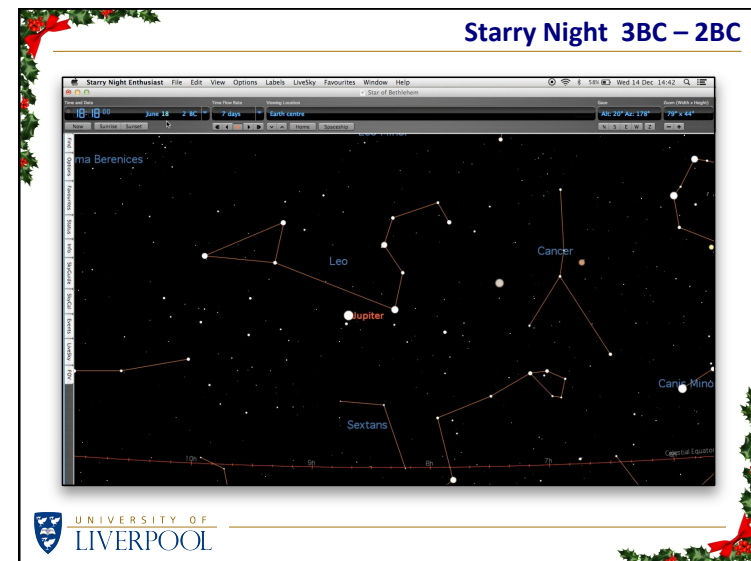
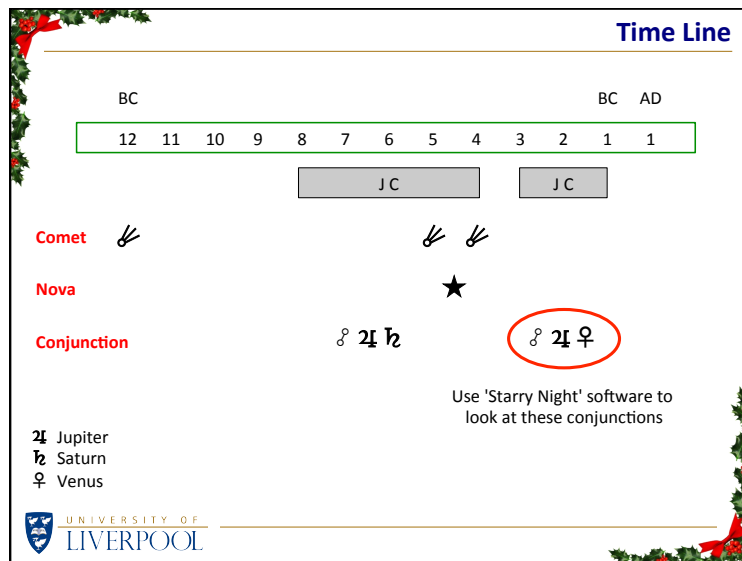
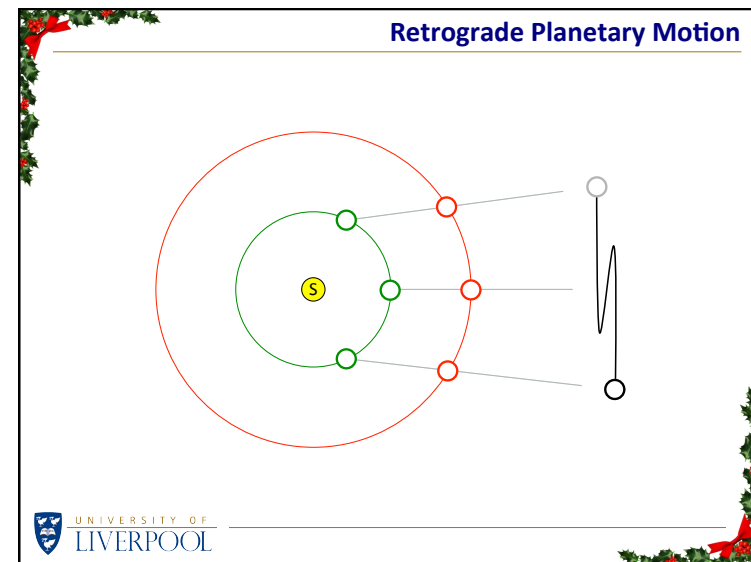
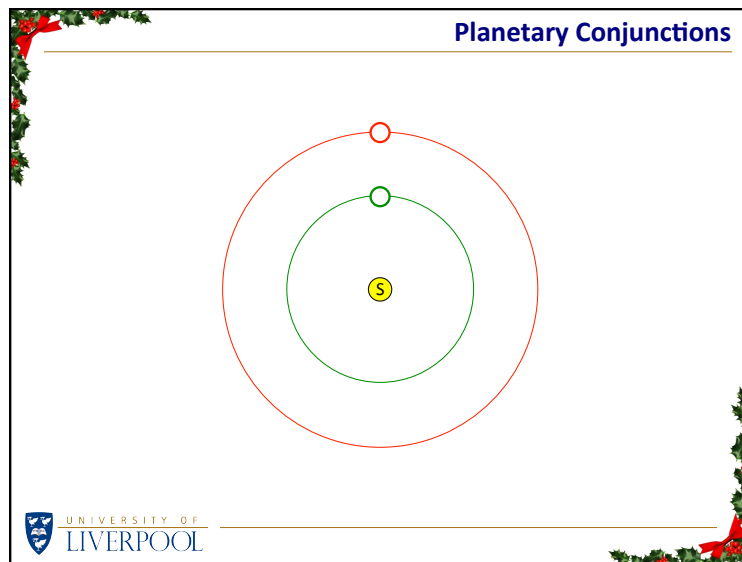


'Star' Candidates

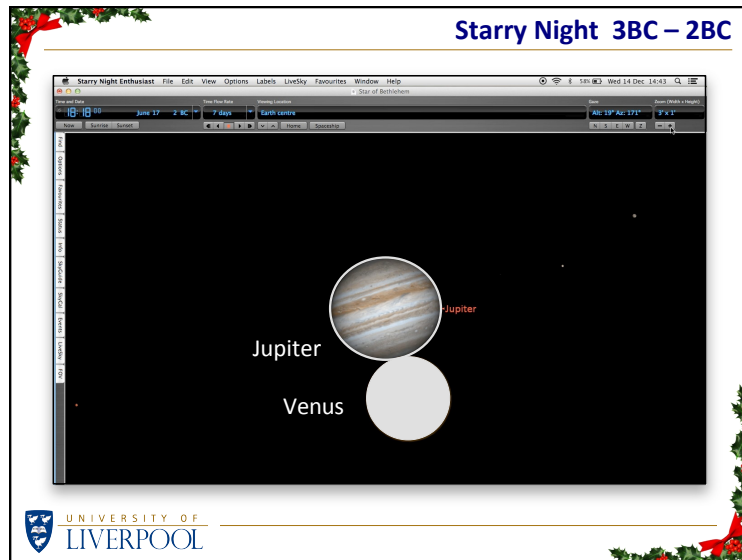
'Star'		Star in East	Significant	Herod wasn't aware	Star re-appeared in sky	Star stopped in sky
Meteor	///	?	✗	✓	✓	✗
Comet	彗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Nova	★	✓	✓	?	?	✗
Supernova	★	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Conjunction	♊	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



Star of Bethlehem



Star of Bethlehem



What the Magi Saw

3 BC August	Sep – May	2 BC June	December
♂ ♀ in Leo	♂ – Regulus	♂ ♀ in Leo	♂ stops
Birth King Jews	Placing the crown	"Go Now"	Magi arrive

University of Liverpool

Summary

Maybe it was these conjunctions that inspired the account in the Gospel of St Matthew.

Maybe it was a different astronomical event, or a combination of such events, that occurred within a few months.

Determining the astronomical facts is not difficult. Second-guessing the significance that the magi or other astrologers attributed to these events is a different matter.

Regardless, the underlying message is the same ...

University of Liverpool

Star of Bethlehem

www.liverpool.ac.uk/~sdb/Talks

Dr Steve Barrett

Astronomy Ireland 12 Dec 2022