

# THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM RECONSIDERED: A REFUTATION OF THE MOSLEY/MARTIN HISTORICAL APPROACH

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## Editor's Note:

The author is a free-lance writer from Santa Cruz, California, and has contributed research to the *Cabrillo College Planetarium*, directed by Allen Grasso, in Aptos, California.

Dr. Ernest L. Martin, Director of the Foundation for Biblical Research, and John Mosley, Program Supervisor for the Griffith Observatory, have proposed a theory stating that the Star of Bethlehem appeared in 3 or 2 B.C., that Jesus was born in 3 or 2 B.C., and that Herod the Great died in 1 B.C.<sup>1</sup> (See Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer, 1980, *Planetarian*.) The key to this theory is the proposition that Herod the Great, king of Judea, died in 1 B.C.<sup>2</sup> And the key to this proposition is the suggestion that Antipater, one of Herod's sons, reigned as king or "co-regent" of Judea from 4 B.C. to 1 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

Though superficially attractive, this theory is utterly false. The star and Jesus appeared before the death of Herod and Herod died in late 5 B.C. or very early 4 B.C.—not in 1 B.C. Therefore, the astronomical evidence for the Star of Bethlehem in 3 or 2 B.C. offered by Martin and Mosley is inadmissible.

The false notion that Herod died in 1 B.C. was proposed by W. E. Filmer in 1966.<sup>4</sup> This idea was then thoroughly and completely discredited by T. D. Barnes in 1968.<sup>5</sup> Four years later Dr. Harold W. Hoehner, now serving as Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Dallas Theological Seminary, exposed the weaknesses of the Filmer theory and concluded it "will not stand" in the face of available historical evidence.<sup>6</sup> Scholars S. Safrai, M. Stern, D. Flusser, and W. C. van Unnik concluded in 1974 that the historical evidence presented by T. D. Barnes is "entirely convincing" in establishing the date of Herod's death as no later than 4 B.C.<sup>7</sup>

So how are Martin and Mosley able to say that Herod died in 1 B.C.? Only one way—by offering the false suggestion that Antipater reigned as king of Judea from 4 B.C. to 1 B.C. Then, according to Martin and Mosley, after the deaths of Antipater and Herod in 1 B.C., Herod's three succeeding sons "backdated" the beginning of their reigns to 4 B.C. to blot out the record of Antipater's rule! This theory is set forth to accommodate the fact that Archelaus, Herod's succeeding son, was banished from office in 6 A.D. in his tenth year of rule.<sup>8</sup>

The Martin/Mosley theory states the following:<sup>9</sup>

1. Herod was disgraced and demoted by Augustus Caesar in 4 B.C.;
2. Herod then named Antipater "co-regent" in 4 B.C. and "Herod's reign was seen to have officially ended." (In contradiction to this "end" of Herod's reign, Martin and Mosley later state that "Herod and Antipater ruled jointly from 4 B.C. until early 1 B.C."<sup>10</sup>) And then,
3. Herod and Antipater died in 1 B.C. and Herod's three succeeding sons "backdated" the commencement of their reigns to 4 B.C. to blot out the record of Antipater's rule.

The theory proposed by Martin and Mosley totally collapses because the above three points are false for the following reasons:

## Herod Disgraced in 8/7 B.C.

1. Dr. Harold W. Hoehner tells us, "In 8/7 B.C. Herod came into disfavor with Augustus and was treated as a subject rather than a friend."<sup>11</sup>
2. Historian Ethelbert Stauffer says, "In 8 B.C. Herod the Great was demoted."<sup>12</sup>
3. Historian William M. Ramsay reports that Herod fell into disgrace with Augustus in either 8 or 7 B.C. while citing as authority historians Schuerer (who supports 8 B.C.) and Lewin (who supports 7 B.C.).<sup>13</sup>
4. And the historian John Buchan says, "About 8 B.C. Herod fell out of favour with Augustus, who said bitterly that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son."<sup>14</sup> (Augustus said this because of Herod's cruelty to his family.)

Herod's disgrace simply meant that he was no longer considered a "friend of Caesar." There is no evidence suggesting Herod was dethroned or ever shared his kingship with anyone. Herod reigned as king of Judea until his death. Flavius Josephus, a first century historian, refers to Herod as "king" until Herod's death.

## Antipater Never Reigned

1. Whatever authority was given to Antipater was given only as a "concession" from his father Herod the king who remained Herod the king.<sup>15</sup> Flavius Josephus twice refers to Herod as "king" in the paragraph mentioning the "concession." A "concession" is a privilege granted by the controlling authority; in this case, Herod the king was the controlling authority.
2. Historian T. D. Barnes states that *Antiquities*, XVII, 3 written by Flavius Josephus offers "a clear proof that Antipater was not counted as co-ruler."<sup>16</sup> This passage reveals that Antipater was only heir to the throne and not yet king.
3. After being named heir to his father's throne, Antipater went off to live in Rome with his friends.<sup>17</sup> While living in Rome for at least seven months, Antipater continually sought to have his father murdered.<sup>18</sup> This leads us to ask two important questions:
  - a. How can Antipater rule Judea as king or "co-regent" if he's living in Rome? The answer is obvious: he can't. Antipater never ruled Judea. And,
  - b. Why did Antipater continually try to have his father Herod murdered if Antipater was already king? Again the answer is obvious: Antipater was an anxious heir to the throne who was trying to kill the king in order to speed up his inheritance.

Herod the Great was king of Judea until his death and he never shared his kingship.

#### Herod the Great Died in 5/4 B.C.

1. Herod the Great was named king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. and died in his thirty-seventh year of reign from the date of that appointment.<sup>19</sup> This indicates that Herod died in 4 B.C.
2. Herod the Great captured Jerusalem and possessed the land of Judea in 37 B.C. and died in his thirty-fourth year of reign from that date.<sup>20</sup> This indicates that Herod died in 4 B.C.
3. Historical evidence shows that Herod's three succeeding sons all reckoned their reigns from 5 or 4 B.C. The three sons began their reigns either from the time of Herod's death or from the confirmation of Herod's last will by Augustus in Rome. Archelaus, succeeding his father Herod, was deposed and banished from the throne of Judea in 6 A.D. when he was in his tenth year of rule.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Archelaus began his reign as ethnarch in 4 B.C. after his father's death.
4. Antipas, another heir, lost his tetrarchy in 38/39 A.D. and coins exist which were minted in his forty-third year of rule.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Herod died in 5 or 4 B.C.
5. Philip's reign ended in the twentieth year of Tiberius Caesar after Philip ruled his tetrarchy for thirty-seven years.<sup>23</sup> The twentieth year of Tiberius was 33/34 A.D. Therefore, Philip began his reign in about 4 B.C. after the death of his father Herod.
6. While the succession of Herod's three sons was being confirmed by Augustus in Rome according to Herod's last will, a revolt in Judea was suppressed by Varus, the governor of Syria.<sup>24</sup> Coins reveal that Varus ruled from 7/6 to 5/4 B.C.<sup>25</sup> It's not known who ruled as governor of Syria between 4 B.C. and 1 B.C. and no convincing evidence has been presented to establish that Varus governed Syria after 4 B.C.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is very likely that Varus ended the Jerusalem revolt in the summer of 4 B.C.<sup>27</sup>
7. During the hearing wherein Augustus confirmed the last will of Herod, the historian Josephus reports that Augustus summoned his grandson Gaius Caesar to serve as a counsellor to hear the matter.<sup>28</sup> Gaius was voted approval by the Roman Senate in 5 B.C. to begin participating in public business.<sup>29</sup> This makes it possible and likely that Gaius was appointed to the "consilium" of Augustus at this time or shortly thereafter. Historian T. D. Barnes reasons that this is the case.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the hearing of Herod's last will in Rome probably took place in the summer of 4 B.C.
8. Martin and Mosely state that Gaius Caesar suppressed the Jerusalem revolt while Herod's last will was being heard in Rome.<sup>31</sup> Josephus tells us very clearly that Gaius Caesar was in Rome (not in Jerusalem)

hearing the matter of Herod's last will in the company of Augustus.<sup>32</sup> Can Gaius be in two different places at the exact same time? Of course not. Once again the theory of Martin and Mosely is shown to be false.

9. Is it possible that Gaius may have been in Rome to hear Herod's last will in the summer of 1 B.C.? No, because historical evidence shows that Gaius was on military expeditions outside of Rome beginning in 2 B.C.<sup>33</sup> Gaius then went on to Syria where he began his governorship in 1 B.C. or in 1 A.D. Historians Dr. Harold W. Hoehner and William M. Ramsay say Gaius began his reign in Syria in 1 B.C.<sup>34</sup> T. D. Barnes concludes that Gaius began his governorship in 1 A.D.<sup>35</sup> Since Gaius was away from Rome in 1 B.C., Herod's last will could not have been heard in Rome during the summer of that year. But Gaius was very likely present in Rome during the summer of 4 B.C. for the settlement of Herod's last will.

#### Conclusion

All of the above evidence fits together in a way that clearly tells us Herod the Great king of Judea, died no later than 4 B.C.

The notion that Antipater reigned as king or "co-regent" of Judea from 4 B.C. to 1 B.C. with the death of Herod the Great occurring in 1 B.C. is simply flat-out false and cannot be supported by available historical evidence.

Since the Star of Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus occurred while Herod the Great was still alive, candidates for the Star of Bethlehem must be sought in the skies before 4 B.C.<sup>36</sup> The astronomical evidence offered by Martin and Mosley from 3 and 2 B.C. is simply inadmissible.

If anyone wishes to discover the rising star heralding the birth of Christ, they must look up to the heavens before 4 B.C.

#### Notes

1. John Mosley, "When Was That Christmas Star?" *Griffith Observer*, December 1980. p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 6.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 5.
4. W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *The Journal of Theological Studies* (New Series) vol. 17 (1966) pp. 283-98.
5. T. D. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," *The Journal of Theological Studies* (New Series) vol. 19 (1968) pp. 204-9.
6. Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 10, note 5.

7. Safrai, S., M. Stern, D. Flusser, and W. C. van Unnik, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 68.
8. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 17, Chapter 13, Section 2.
9. Mosley, "Star?" p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
11. Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), p. 17.
12. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 31.
13. William M. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* 3rd edition (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), p. 178.
14. John Buchan, *Augustus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), p. 191.
15. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 2, Section 4.
16. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 206, note 7.
17. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 3, Section 2.
18. *Ibid.* Book 17, Chapter 4, Section 3; Book 17, Chapter 5, Section 1.
19. *Ibid.* Book 17, Chapter 8, Section 1; Hoehner, *Christ*, pp. 12-13.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 13, Section 2; Book 18, Chapter 2, Section 1; Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 205.
22. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 205.
23. *Ibid.*; Hoehner, *Antipas*, note 5.
24. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 10, Section 1.
25. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 207.
26. Hoehner, *Christ*, p. 20.
27. Stauffer, *Jesus*, p. 56
28. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 9, Section 5.
29. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 208.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Mosley, "Star?" p. 5.
32. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 17, Chapter 9, Section 5.
33. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 208.
34. Hoehner, *Christ*, p. 20; William M. Ramsay, "Studies in the Roman Province Galatia," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 7 (1917) p. 272.
35. Barnes, "Herod's Death," p. 208.
36. Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5 (King James Version of the Bible).



## "THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM RECONSIDERED: A MYTHOLOGICAL APPROACH"

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"No, the whole tale [of the traditional story of the Star of Bethlehem] is but an ingenious working out after the fact."

Isaac Asimov

Traditionally at Christmas time, most planetaria around the world have offered an *astrological* explanation of the Star of Bethlehem focusing on the unusual conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars which occurred in the constellation of Pices, the Fish, in 7 to 6 B.C. However, there now exists anthropological and archaeological evidence that, even if the wise men, or Magi, were astrologers, a better interpretation of the Star can be offered, which has nothing to do with astrology, but everything to do with astronomy and cosmology as understood and perpetuated by the language of pre-technological, pre-literate man.

The theory at the heart of this new understanding was originated in an essay by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend called "Hamlet's Mill." The theory is also supported by Harold A. T. Reiche of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The theory, in Reiche's words, holds that "myths were vehicles for memorizing and transmitting certain kinds of astronomical

and cosmological information." The mythological formula identified by Professor von Dechend is really a mechanism to explain precisely the slowest of all observable motions in the heavens, the precession (or westward movement) of the equinoxes against the fixed stars. According to the mythological formula then, the most important position in the sky is the position of the sun on the first day of Spring. However, because of this slow motion, the constellation marking the vernal equinox is gradually replaced by the constellation to the west in a slow, almost imperceptible motion that takes approximately 2,150 years (a precessional year is 25,800 years long). Also according to the mythological formula, the constellation "containing" the vernal equinox was referred to as the world age of Pices or Aries or Taurus, depending on the position of the sun the first day of Spring.

Interestingly enough, at the time of the birth of Christ, we find that the vernal equinox was between Aries, the Ram, and Pices, the Fish. In 150 B.C. the