

Messiah the Bright Morning Star

Around the world people of different cultures love to celebrate. Hindus recently celebrated their festival of light called, Diwali. A few weeks later there was Hannukah, the Jewish celebration of lights. Then came Christmas which is sometimes called the Christian festival of light. As most people know, light is highlighted in the Biblical story of Christ's birth. The prophet Isaiah portrayed the long awaited Messiah as bringing a "great light" to people living in the land of the shadow of death. Scripture describes Jesus as the "bright Morning Star" whose coming signals the dawning of the Day. Then there's the familiar story of wise men following a star that led them to Bethlehem. We often see Christmas cards showing iconic images of camels carrying magi. Another Christmas tradition that reminds us of this story is the stars as featured in decorations, especially when a bright star is prominently put on top of the Christmas tree. Presumably this is reminiscent of the star of Bethlehem.

We've mentioned Hindus and Jews but what about Muslims or other religions? V. Jayaram, a student of comparative religion notes that "light has been universally associated with divinity or godliness in almost every culture and civilization." (Symbolism of Light in Hinduism) Interestingly, one of the most often recited verses of the Qur'an says, "*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.*" (Surah 24:35) Moreover, the Qur'an affirms Isa brought spiritual light which fulfilled the Law and the prophets.

A few weeks ago I attended a year end Yazidi celebration in London where there were 400 Kurdish speaking people. I was interested to learn that they believe in one God who created everything. Somewhat similar to Muslims, they believe God revealed truth through the prophets, one of whom was Jesus Christ. Indeed, one of their fascinating burial rites involves turning the face of a deceased person towards the Morning Star. I'm curious to ask my Yazidi friends what this means. "Is this special star a beacon, perhaps a hope of resurrection!"

It seems more than coincidental that Kurdish people traditionally believe the wise men who followed a star to Bethlehem were their ancestors. This merits serious consideration, considering that "magi were a specific high-level caste associated with stars and wisdom in Persia."

(https://answersingenesis.org/holidays/christmas/we-three-kings/#fn_1 & <http://www.ekurd.net>) This connection with Kurdish people extends wider to ancient Persia, even including the kingdom of Babylon as we shall see.

The star of Bethlehem

The question arises: How did the magi at the time of Christ realize the star over Israel indicated a king was born? Five hundred years earlier a young man named Daniel was captured in Jerusalem and exiled to Babylon. He was very gifted and soon became chief of all the wise men in that kingdom. "Daniel was appointed chief of the diviners, mediums, Chaldeans and astrologers" because he "was found to have an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and perception, and the ability to interpret dreams." (Daniel 5:11-12, HCSB) Daniel loved God very much. Since he was a very devote Jew he knew God's Word well including a remarkable oracle by Balaam, a Moabite diviner.

Balaam's oracle recorded in Numbers 24:15-17 reads; "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)

Daniel would have informed his fellow wise men about this prediction and such great knowledge

would have been passed down to future generations of magi and astrologers. This scenario correlates with what historians tell us about the Near East at that time. 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.” (Zoe Misiewicz, quoted from the Abstract of his book, *Astrology ancient Near East*, available online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah01021>)

With this being the case in the ancient Near East, it helps us understand how the wise men in the Christmas story knew about the star and the new born king. Isn't God great!

As Scripture says, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’” (Isaiah 46:9-10)

Are these insights relevant?

Today, large numbers of newcomers from the Middle East have come to the west, especially Muslims, including Kurdish and Yazidi people. Islam and Yazidi religion revere Danyal (Daniel) as a wise prophet although many know very few details of his life and teaching. “More than half a dozen cities in Iran, Iraq and even Uzbekistan make the claim” [i.e. Daniel was buried there] But the majority of Jews and Muslims believe the Tomb of Daniel in Shush, Iran to be the correct one.”

<http://thecompletepilgrim.com/tomb-daniel/> Have any of you visited one of these shrines?

Considering that Muslims and Yazidis believe Jesus/Isa brought spiritual light, wouldn't they be curious to know the prophets foretold the Messiah (al Masih in the Qur'an) would bring God's light and salvation to the world? As it is written, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob ... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

We see glimpses of how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when he said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) and in John 4:42 when he was acclaimed by Gentiles in Sychar as “the Saviour of the world.”

Here is something else for you to think about. Consider how Isaiah's prophesy correlates with the Messiah's virgin birth, particularly the unusual way he received his name from an angel of God/Allah. We shouldn't be surprised to learn that the name ‘Jesus’ means, God’s salvation! This is acknowledged by Muhammad I. A. Usman, a respected Mufti, in his book, *Islamic Names* (p. 77, revised & enlarged edition).

What does it mean that the Messiah will bring “light and salvation”?

As bringer of light the Messiah dispelled darkness and death, thereby bringing the light of life. Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would bring great light. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Speaking of life in this way fits perfectly with John 8:12 where Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Speaking of light as LIFE, it is interesting that Jesus healed people who were terminally ill and those on their death bed. He also raised to life a young man, the only son of a widow. Her sobbing

suddenly stopped – her tears replaced by joy.

Sadly, many people in our day, carry heartache during the festive season of Christmas from painful memories of losing a loved one. I recall experiencing waves of grief after my father's untimely death at the age of 34. These painful memories lingered for many years.

But the Lord is the God of all comfort. The prophet Isaiah provides a glimpse of God's compassionate heart as he foretells a day when God will wipe away all tears. Isaiah declared that in Jerusalem God “*will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears. ... the Lord has spoken! In that day the people will proclaim, ‘This is our God. We trusted in him and he saved us. This is the Lord in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings.’*” (Isaiah 25:7-9, NLT)

Let's be careful not to overlook a detail here indicating **where** God will destroy death. Notice, this amazing event will take place “in Jerusalem.” Speaking as a prophet, Jesus confirmed what Isaiah foretold,

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. 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)

Jesus is the true light of the world and there is no other name whereby we can be saved. We live in a day and age of multiculturalism that promotes ecumenism and interfaith unity.* We also live in Canada where tolerance is valued so much that it is virtually idolized. Most Canadians don't hesitate endorsing Divali as a festival of light. I suspect that few of us felt any real qualms when I compared in the introduction how various cultures celebrate light, either in Divali or Hannukah or Christmas.

As we draw to a conclusion, let me voice a word of caution. Jesus said, “*Make sure that the **light** you think you have is not actually darkness.*” (Luke 11:35, NLT) What could Jesus mean by this warning? Are humans prone to self deception? Isn't it true that all of us tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought? If we do admit to having any moral flaws, we make light of them by saying, “No one's perfect.”

How does Christ's warning relate to followers of the Hindu faith whose rituals feature the symbolism of light? Not only so, they honour Jesus as an avatar, a kind of religious superstar. Nevertheless, beneath the shining veneer of religiosity, Hindus cling to idols in one form or other.

What about Muslims who believe in only one God and who respect Jesus as a noble prophet? Sadly, they reject him as God's unique Son. Also, they emphatically reject the cornerstone of the Christian faith – the Messiah's death and resurrection, which brings “life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Tim. 1:10)

As a way to help you think deeper on these vital concerns, let me point you to what the apostle John wrote as he saw a vision of Jesus. We read in Revelation 1:16-18, “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.'”

Christ's reassuring words dispelled John's intense fear. But what about our fear? What is the one thing humans most fear, whether their own death or someone they love? The spectre of death. Now think about it: Standing there in front of John was someone who claimed that he rose triumphantly from the grave and he lives forever. Not only so, he has the keys of death meaning he has the authority to free anyone who puts their trust in him from the vice grip which death has on us in the grave.

Let me encourage you to ponder something else, “What does it mean to be the First and the Last?” Can you think of any mere mortal who claimed for himself such an exalted title?” “Is there any human, beside Jesus, who lived an absolutely sinless life?” “Was there any godly person, beside Jesus, who claimed to forgive people's sin?” (cf. John 8:46; Mark 2:1-12; Ecclesiastes 7:20) For these reasons Scripture describes him as the cornerstone. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12; Psalm 118:22)

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

Here is a list of online articles you may wish to look at pertaining to light.

Lighting up the darkness: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/lighting_darkness.html

Following the star: http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/following_star.html

The path of righteousness: https://www.answeringislam.org/authors/clarke/path_of_righteousness.html

Meditation on light: https://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/meditation_light.html

Userguide for the sunrise pamphlet: https://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/userguide_sunrise.html

Notes

* What do I mean by “ecumenism and interfaith unity?” Efforts to unify religious people globally regardless of their faith while showing little concern to uphold the truth.