Before the Christmas season is completely forgotten, it should consider one of Christianity’s most familiar images, the Star of Bethlehem. Described in Matthew 2:9-11 as leading the wise men to the infant Jesus’ house, it has seized the Christian imagination and returns every December in Christmas-season worship. It often appears in art, whether in classical paintings, Christmas cards, or children’s Sunday-school drawings.

Matthew describes the star to indicate Jesus’ special character. After all, not everyone has a star that rises over them at their birth. Along with the appearance of Matthew’s wise men and Luke’s angels, Gospel readers get a clear signal right from the start that Jesus is someone extraordinary. But why a star? What did the star indicate about Jesus to those living at the time? Quite simply, it meant that Jesus was a human being who was a god. By choosing to put the star into his story, something which Luke chose not to do, Matthew made clear to his readers that he viewed Jesus as divine.

In the first century AD, this message could not have been missed, because the long-lived Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire, had just spent decades promoting the connection between a star and the deification of another human being; in this case, the deified person was Julius Caesar.

Julius’s adopted 18-year-old son Octavian, who would become Caesar Augustus.

The murder took place during the Ides of March (March 15), and during celebrations honoring Julius the following July, a comet appeared in the Roman sky. For more than a week, it was bright enough to be seen during the day. This was taken as a sign of the dead Julius Caesar’s deification and his apotheosis (ascension) up to heaven and was known in Latin as Sidus Iulium ("Julian Star").

The young Octavian seized on this "comet star" for the purpose of religious and political propaganda, persuading the Senate to grant Julius divine status in 42 BC and then erecting a temple to the star, which he dedicated in 29 BC.

Ovid related the story in his Metamorphosis, written in 8 AD. "Then Jupiter, the Father, spoke..., 'Take up Caesar's spirit from his murdered corpse, and change it into a star, so that the deified Julius may always look down from his high temple on our Capitol and forum.'...[The goddess] Venus...took up the newly freed spirit of her Caesar from his body, and preventing it from vanishing into the air, carried it...higher than the moon, and drawing behind it a fiery tail, [which] shone as a star."

In the ancient Mediterranean world, coins were issued by the rulers and carried their political message. Octavian issued coins commemorating the comet star several times. A coin from 19-18 BC placed Octavian (now Caesar Augustus) on the obverse and prominently displayed on the reverse the star with eight rays and the label divus ivliu "Divine Julius." The comet was indicated by adding flames to the vertical ray.

By the time of Jesus’ birth in 4 BC, these coins had entered widespread use from Spain in the west Mediterranean to Syria and Palestine in the east. They carried the story of Julius Caesar and the star as the sign of his divine status.

In his gospel, Matthew drew upon this widely known link between a bright star and the divine nature of a human. The main difference between Julius and Jesus, in Matthew’s view, was that Julius had to wait until his death before deification, while Jesus’ divine character was clear from his birth.

Flesher is a professor in UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.