

The Star of Bethlehem

from an astronomical and astrological perspective

By Dieter Koch

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Forget the most common version of the Star of Bethlehem: it was not a Saturn-Jupiter conjunction that shone down on the newborn Jesus, but Venus! In this scientifically based derivation, philosopher and archaeoastronomer Dieter Koch deciphers the reports from the Gospels and comes to a surprising conclusion.



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The Legend of the Christmas Star

The legend of the Christmas Star is found in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The Amplified Bible translates it as follows:

1. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men [astrologers] from the east came to Jerusalem, asking,
2. Where is He Who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east at its rising and have come to worship Him.
3. When Herod the king heard this, he was disturbed and troubled, and the whole of Jerusalem with him.
4. So he called together all the chief priests and learned men (scribes) of the people and anxiously asked them where the Christ was to be born.
5. They replied to him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:
6. And you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are not in any way least or insignificant among the chief cities of Judah; for from you shall come a Ruler (Leader) Who will govern and shepherd My people Israel.
7. Then Herod sent for the wise men [astrologers] secretly, and accurately to the last point ascertained from them the time of the appearing of the star [that is, how long the star had made itself visible since its rising in the east].
8. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search for the Child carefully and diligently, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.
9. When they had listened to the king, they went their way, and behold, the star which had been seen in the east in its rising went before them until it came and stood over the place where the young Child was.
10. When they saw the star, they were thrilled with ecstatic joy.
11. And on going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then opening their treasure bags, they presented to Him gifts--gold and frankincense and myrrh.
12. And receiving an answer to their asking, they were divinely instructed and warned in a dream not to go back to Herod; so they departed to their own country by a different way.
13. Now after they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Get up! [Tenderly] take unto you the young Child and His mother and flee to Egypt; and remain there till I tell you [other- wise], for Herod intends to search for the Child in order to destroy Him.
14. And having risen, he took the Child and His mother by night and with- drew to Egypt
15. And remained there until Herod's death. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, Out of Egypt have I called My Son.
16. Then Herod, when he realised that he had been misled by the wise men, was furiously enraged, and he sent and put to death all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that territory who were two years old and under, reckoning according to the date which he had investigated diligently and had learned exactly from the wise men.

Up to now, attempts to explain the star astronomically have not been conclusive. Practically, anything seems possible: conjunctions of planets, occultations by the moon, comets, variable stars, novae and other phenomena. As I intend to show, the problem is not a lack of clarity, or ambiguity in the text, but rather the prevailing rigid ideas that immediately tend to exclude the most natural explanation. As a result, due attention is not paid to the evidence within the text, and this lack of attention then becomes the source of all kinds of assumptions.

The Magi

One of the rigid ideas is that the star must have been a *totally extraordinary phenomenon* in order to prompt the Magi to embark on the long journey from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem. However, the following details contradict this:

1. Herod asks the Magi about the "time of the star". The phenomenon was apparently neither noticeable nor visible to everyone.
2. In astrological practice then (as now) an extraordinary horoscope is generally not marked by extraordinary phenomena but rather by an unusual configuration of the planets. At most, a certain *planet* may be prominent.
3. If one studies the approach of the Magi, one has to recognize that they do not merely rely on observing the heavens but also consult dreams and the holy scriptures. The star itself is not necessarily enough to prophecy a Messiah. For instance, the Magi could have been following a prophecy or vision such as: "Birth of a royal child in the country of Palestine at the next morning appearance of star X".

I intend to show that under these circumstances a completely new interpretation of the star of Bethlehem becomes possible, one that is more realistic, closer to the text but not less spectacular than all the other theories. And this pertains, incidentally, even if we take the story of the Magi to be a mere myth. Nevertheless, it gives an account of a clearly identifiable celestial configuration.

"Magi came from the east": The word "magi" (Gr. *magoi*) derives from the old Persian and refers to the priests of Zoroastrianism. As they come from the east and concern themselves with stars, they could well have traveled from Mesopotamia, the homeland of astrology. Through the conquest of Mesopotamia by Cyrus II, magi came into contact with the *Chaldeans*, the Babylonian astrologers.

Even today, magic is based strongly on astrological symbolism. As mentioned above, Matthew's text indicates that the Magi combined various methods of prophecy. They were warned against Herod in a *dream*. And they consulted Jewish scribes about old *prophecies* that could show them the way to the child. In addition, Zoroastrian texts *prophesy* the coming of a redeemer, the so-called Saoshyant.

Therefore, the star is probably not the only reason for the Magi's journey. They relied instead on *several signs and methods*. Did the Magi possibly proceed as Tibetan monks do in looking for the Karmapa child? They followed a prophecy consisting of clues about time, place and the family of the reincarnated one. The question is: were the Magi also following a prophecy or a dream according to which their redeemer would be born in the land of the Jews at the next appearance of a certain star?

Our calendar is not precise

"in the days of Herod": Jesus would have been born before Herod died. According to the current school of thought Herod died in 4 BCE, although some authors think that it was rather in 1 BCE. Unfortunately, the biblical statements in connection with the birth of Jesus are controversial. In any case, our calendar, which pretends to have started with the birth of Jesus Christ, is certainly not correct. Jesus was neither born at the beginning of year 1 CE nor was he born on the 25th December. This date for Christmas was only introduced by the church during the 4th century with the intention of replacing heathen solstice celebrations.

"his star was seen in the east (lit. in the rising)": Against popular belief, this does not necessarily mean that the Magi saw a star in their eastern homeland. Is the following interpretation not rather implied: that they saw the star "at its rising in the east". The text states literally: *en tē anatolē*, i.e. "in rising, in the east". Therefore, one cannot assume that the Magi were in their homeland when they saw the star. They could very well have seen it *rising in the east* from somewhere in Palestine. Let us keep this thought in mind.

Heliacal Rising



Der Morgenstern Venus (links unterhalb des Mondes) - © Gerhard Hühedepohl, Wikipedia.com



Interpreting it in this way, it makes more sense astrologically, too. In Mesopotamia, priests versed in astronomy and astronomers paid special attention to the *first morning rising* (or *heliacal rising*) of a star after a period when it had been invisible. Matthew specifically mentions an “*appearance*”(phainesthai) of the star. During the course of a year, most stars disappear once from the western evening sky and reappear a few weeks later in the eastern morning sky. In the intervening period they are overtaken by the sun and its light outshines them so that they cannot be seen. Passing from being invisible to being visible in the eastern morning sky was understood to be analogous with the process of birth. Some Babylonian birth horoscopes that have been preserved on Cuneiform tablets mention the heliacal rising of planets, if they occurred close to a birth.

“*asked the precise time*”: Herod asks about the time when the star appeared. Apparently he asked about this because he wanted to know the age of the child he wanted to kill. Further on, Matthew recounts that Herod had all the children, who lived in Bethlehem and its vicinity and were two years old or younger, killed at the precise time that he had “found out from the Magi”. (Matth. 2:16).

Because of the statement above, it has been assumed that two years must have elapsed between the appearance of the star and the arrival of the Magi. However, astrology usually proceeds from the assumption of *simultaneousness* of heavenly and earthly happenings. Matthew states in the beginning that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem *at the time of the birth of Jesus*. Justinus Martyr is even more explicit: “For, at the same time (αμα) as his birth, Magi came from Arabia and paid him homage, after they had first come to Herod”. And: “The Magi said they had recognized from the appearance of a star in the sky that in your land a king has been born”. Apart from this, Jesus is said to have been born in a temporary shelter and that he was visited by the Magi in the same place. Shortly after this, the Holy Family fled to Egypt. Therefore, the Magi must have arrived very shortly after the birth of Jesus.

The Star in the Orient

From all the above information it becomes clear that the Magi must have reached Jerusalem more or less simultaneously with the star's appearance – quite the opposite of the current *prejudice* that the Magi had discovered the star in their homeland (“in the orient”) and for this reason had started on their journey to Palestine. Instead, one can rather assume that the Magi anticipated the appearance of the star and that they planned their journey so that they would arrive in Palestine at the right time. In fact, when Mesopotamian astronomers invented birth horoscopes from about 500 BCE, they developed algorithms for calculating positions of planets and they also knew ephemerides. The Magi could thus start on their journey long before the appearance of the star in order to find the child as soon as possible after it had been born.

Herod's question clearly shows that the star was not a remarkable celestial phenomenon. This mistaken idea can be traced back to the Gospel of James, where it reads: “We saw a very large star shining among other stars and it caused their light to pale”. However, would Herod have needed an explanation if this had been the case? Would the star not have been the talk of the day? Still, James' description may contain a grain of truth. Amongst the ordinary celestial phenomena there are very bright and beautiful stars, for instance Venus or Jupiter.



Being led by the Star

“*the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them*”: Being led by the star cannot, of course, be taken literally. An astronomical phenomenon does not make random movements, but appears in the same position to all inhabitants of a certain region. Some authors have understood this phrase to mean that the Magi saw the star directly in front of them while they journeyed from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The road runs north-south. Therefore, the star would have to have appeared in the south. However, this is highly unlikely. Provided that the Magi really did arrive in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth and the heliacal rising of his star, it would have been bright daylight by the time the star stood in the south. They could only have seen it in the east, in the morning before sunrise.

The Greek word *proágein* that has been translated as “went ahead of” could have been an astronomical term. For the retrograde motion of planets, Ptolemy and his contemporaries used the word *prohegeisthai* which is synonymous with the New Testament *proágein*. Moreover, the term derives from Mesopotamian astrology, and it is explained by the fact that planets in retrograde motion are faster in their daily motion than fixed stars and planets in their phase of direct motion. Therefore, the statement that the star “went ahead” of the Magi would mean that the star was in a phase of retrograde motion. It was visible only in the morning, in the east. The Magi left early in the morning and while they journeyed south, the planet in its retrograde phase was on their left. The journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is so short that they could have reached Bethlehem well before sunrise.



“*came to stand still*”: In the case of an astronomical phenomenon, the “standing still” of the star cannot be taken literally either. All heavenly bodies move continuously from east to west in the course of a day. However, *the stations of the planets*, that is their standing still in relation to the zodiac or the fixed stars, are significant in astronomy. The Magi would then have found the child on the day the planet ended its retrograde motion, became *stationary*, and reversed the direction of its sidereal movement.

“*above (the place) where the child was*”: Here, too, it has to be noted that no star can ever stand above a *specific* house or a *specific* person. If it is at its zenith, then it is standing equally above *all* the houses in an area. For the same reason that it could not have been in the south, it could also not have been at its zenith. A few days after its heliacal rising, it could only have been seen before sunrise. It is likely that Matthew meant that the star stopped *when the Magi arrived at the place where the child was*.

“*great joy*”: This joy seems to indicate that the star was very beautiful and bright. We read in the Gospel of James that the star was so bright, that it outshone all others. In fact, Venus is the brightest of all the stars. When the moon is not shining and no other lights interfere, it even casts a shadow. Looking at it, who has not been filled with joy?

All the above-mentioned phenomena were taken into account in Babylonian birth horoscopes. Apart from the planet's positions in the zodiac, it also recorded their particular heliacal risings, their retrograde motions and the stations that occurred close to the time of the birth.

Venus

The planet is easily identified by all the facts mentioned. It only could have been Venus because – apart from Mercury which is difficult to observe – only Venus is in retrograde motion when it has its first heliacal rising above the eastern horizon, and it becomes stationary soon afterwards. Jesus is born in a temporary shelter while the star is first seen in the east. The Magi arrive soon after that. The difference between the first heliacal rising and the station is about two weeks for Venus and about four months for Jupiter. Therefore, Venus fits the picture, but Jupiter does not.

However, there are even clearer pointers in the Bible. According to theologians, the Messiah is announced in the Old Testament in the following words: “a star emerges from Jacob” (Numbers 24:17). The legend of the Christmas Star (“we saw *his* star in the rising”) evidently refers to this. The name of this, “his” star, is specifically mentioned at the end of the Revelation of John: “**I, Jesus ... am the root and the offspring of David, the bright Morning Star...**” (Revelation 22:16).

A further verse that associates Jesus with the Morning Star is found in **2nd Peter 1:19: “And so we possess the prophetic word more firmly, to which you will do well to attend, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day breaks and the morning star (phōsphoros, lucifer in the Latin Bible) rises in your hearts”**. The Greek word *phōsphoros* and Latin *Lucifer* actually mean “bringer of light”. The use of this name for the devil arose

at the time of the church fathers and does injustice to its original meaning. In reality, it signifies Venus as the proclaimer of the coming day. This becomes even more evident in the other name for Venus, *eōsphoros*, "bringer of dawn". In antiquity, this function of the planet had a far greater significance than today, especially in southern regions where dawn is very brief.

Incidentally, the verse in Peter is strongly reminiscent of **John 1:9: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world"**. Here, too, the Messiah is probably compared to the morning star. This is a very apt comparison, for Jesus also symbolizes a "coming day" of light, and of knowledge of the Kingdom of God.

After Venus has set as the evening star in the west, the region of death, its spectacular reappearance as the morning star is also a symbol of *the* great theme of Christianity and of other ancient mystery religions: for *resurrection*. The west, the direction of the disappearance of stars was associated with death; as against that, the east, the direction of their rising, was linked to the idea of birth or re-birth. The Mesopotamian as well as the Egyptian sun god descended to the underworld in the west in the evening and was reborn in the east. And a famous Mesopotamian myth recounts how Ishtar, the goddess of Venus, descended to the underworld, died, was resurrected and ascended to heaven.

There is further symbolism in connection with Venus: It is not by chance that it appears as a royal sceptre held by Jesus in Revelation 2:28. In Mesopotamia, Venus had the role of king-maker. She took young heroes as lovers and made them into kings (Gilgamesh). Or she acted as "mother" or "foster mother" to Assyrian kings (Assurbanipal). There is a direct link to Mary and the Christ child who is destined to be the king of the Jews. In the Roman Catholic adoration of the Virgin Mary, she is still occasionally referred to as the "Morning Star". To Sum up: Jesus has remarkable symbolic links to Venus.

The date of the birth of Jesus

Early risings of Venus occur only every 584 days. We can thus entertain the hope of being able to fix the date of Jesus' birth. The Revelation of John is a help: John sees the following vision:

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head". (Revelation 12:1ff.)

The text is interpreted as a vision of the birth of the Messiah. If the woman is the zodiac sign of Virgo and the Sun "clothes" it, this means that the Sun is in Virgo, and thus outshines it, and makes it invisible. The Moon is "under her feet", and thus just in front of the zodiac sign of Libra. The child being born would then be the morning star at its heliacal rising. In fact, there is a date that fits this description: the **1st September 2 BCE** (=astronomical -1).

The Virgin Birth

That clarifies what one may think of the virgin birth (Matth. 1:18ff.): Jesus is simply born in the zodiac sign of Virgo. An interesting detail: Venus did not rise from the womb of the constellation Virgo but from its *head*. Thus, this is a "spiritual" birth, quite similar to the birth of the virginal goddess Athena from the head of Zeus.

This interpretation matches what follows in Revelation 12:3ff.:

"Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne."



The description of the dragon fits the constellation Hydra. The seven heads wearing diadems would be stars in the area of the head, and the ten horns would be bright stars at the side of the body, forming a kind of zigzag pattern. Hydra's tail does not really comprise "a third" of all stars, but it is in fact a very long shape and stretches alongside of four zodiac signs, thus over a third of the zodiac. When Virgo is on the eastern horizon, Hydra really "throws" the stars of its tail "onto the earth" (see ill. 1). The "male child" would then be the morning star. In fact, in the days after its "birth" it first moved towards Hydra's clutches and thus was in danger of being "devoured", but after its standing still it moved away and was "snatched up".

Jesus' Birth Chart

The date of Jesus' birth thus established, it is remarkable to note that it took place precisely on the day of the Jewish New Year (*rosh ha-shanah*). In ancient Israel, as in Mesopotamia, the enthronement of the king was celebrated on this day. The beginning of the reign of the Messiah was also expected on this day. When the kingmaker Venus had its heliacal rising specifically on New Year's day, this was indeed a very special occurrence.

Consequently, we can work out Jesus' astrological birth chart. Is it astrologically convincing, according to the rules of ancient astrology? I believe that it is and it must have striking for ancient astrologers. Leo ascendant corresponds to a king of the Jews. Venus, Jupiter and Mars in conjunction at Leo ascendant indicate a charismatic leader, and a passionate teacher of love, even more so as Venus has just had its heliacal rising and Jupiter and Mars are going to follow soon. Saturn in square to the Sun and Mercury symbolise the difficulties Jesus had with orthodox Jewry.



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